

THE FALSE NERO

By the same Author :

SUCCESS
JEW SUSS
THE UGLY DUCHESS
THE OPPERMANS
LITTLE TALES
THREE PLAYS
TWO PLAYS
JOSEPHUS
JEW OF ROME

THE FALSE NERO

by

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The thing that hath been, it is that which shall be ; and that which is done, is that which shall be done : and there is no new thing under the sun.

Is there anything whereof it may be said, See, this is new ? it hath been already of old time, which was before us.

There is no remembrance of former things ; neither shall there be any remembrance of things that are to come with those that shall come after.

ECCLESIASTES i, 9-11.

Not all the characters in this story are fictitious.

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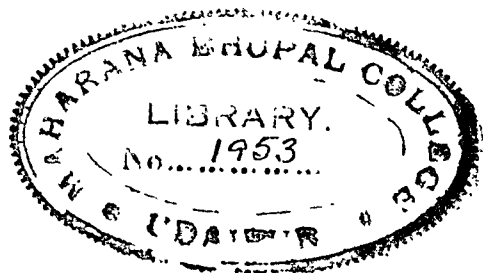
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Book I

R I S E



CHAPTER I

TWO POLITICIANS

As the Senator Varro was being borne to the residence of the Imperial Roman Governor of Syria on that 6th of March, the passers-by turned and looked for a long time after his litter. Two days before, the new Governor Cejonius had solemnly assumed the insignia of his office, the axe and fasces, and the fact that Varro had remained away from the ceremony had excited comment. Now that he belatedly paid his visit of congratulation the whole city of Antioch asked itself how he and the new man would get on with each other.

It was a bright spring day, rather cool; a fresh wind blew from the mountains. The litter turned into the long, fine main street. A faint smile on his lips, Varro noted that already busts of the new Governor were to be seen before many of the public buildings and great business houses, set up there by obsequious citizens and officials. From his quickly moving litter he regarded the busts. They showed a hard, bony little head planted on shoulders defiantly flung back. How long was it since he had seen that head last in flesh and blood? Twelve, no, thirteen years. In those days that face had filled him merely with good-natured contempt. For in those days he, Varro, had himself been the great man. He had been

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one of Nero's intimates, while this fellow Cejonius had failed to win the Emperor's friendship, no matter how hard he tried, and in spite of his high birth and noble title remained in perpetual fear that a royal whim might sweep him away altogether. Now the brilliant Nero was mouldering in the grave. In his chair on the Palatine the Emperor Titus was sitting, narrow-minded officials and soldiers ruled the Empire, and this contemptible, pettifogging little man Cejonius had slipped nicely into the niche to which he was entitled by birth. Now the fellow reigned as Governor in the rich and powerful province of Syria where he, Varro, lived as a mere private citizen. As a private citizen ; for they had long since struck his name from the list of senators, and if the people still cried, "Long live the noble Senator Varro !" they did so out of mere politeness.

Nevertheless Varro, as he scrutinised the busts of the new Governor, still felt the same faint contempt mixed with benevolence which he had felt for the boy at school. Lucius Cejonius came of a rich and ancient family, and he was not without intelligence. But a silly old story cast a shadow on the family name : a Cejonius, a great-grandfather of Lucius, had thrown down his arms seventy-one years before in a battle against a certain Arminius, and from his earliest days Lucius had felt that it was his task to erase that stain from his family's 'scutcheon. The thin anaemic boy had set himself, while still only ten or twelve, to act with the dignity and pride due to his name, and though physically weak had defiantly asserted himself against his companions. His forced insolence, however, had only provoked his friends to make greater fun of him. What was the nickname they had coined for him at school ? Varro knitted his brows in tense thought ; but he could not remember the name.

It would not be exactly a simple business to face the

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good Cejonius again after so many years and in such altered circumstances. Varro's relations to the Government of Syria were extremely complicated. In the Government offices he, the Roman Varro, had always been regarded as the most dangerous enemy of the present Roman régime in Syria. How would he be regarded now under Cejonius, who certainly had not forgotten his old half-pitying, half-hostile contempt?

"Hail, noble Senator Varro," the people shouted on every side. Varro had the curtain of his litter flung back farther and sat up, so that his tanned, fleshy face with the huge brow, the salient Roman nose and the full lips might be better seen by the populace. He complacently savoured the general homage. He felt superior to this new representative of the Empire. It was more important to him that he should make his will prevail here in Antioch than that he should be loved on the Palatine. In contemporary Rome, the Rome of the Flavians and Titus, all that one needed was birth and money, nothing more. Here in Antioch, among these mistrustful, touchy, mixed races of Greeks, Syrians and Jews, one had perpetually to assert oneself by one's personality and one's actions, had to earn the trust of these changeable multitudes anew every day. He had managed it, had established his position in Syria. He could confront the representative of the Roman Emperor today as a power real beyond denial, though he could point to no treaty or privilege to vouch for that power.

He had now reached the palace of the Governor. Among the insignia a shrine had already been set up with the customary wax effigies of Cejonius's ancestors, one of them veiled; it was that of his great-grandfather who had brought shame on the family. Cejonius evidently did not think that he could yet pay Varro out for remaining away from the ceremony of his induction.

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He appeared in the crowded waiting-room. Before the eyes of everyone there he embraced Varro and kissed him (a ceremony rendered somewhat ludicrous by the smallness of the one man and the bulk of the other), and in everyone's hearing proclaimed his joy at finding the friend of his youth in such blooming health. Then he cordially conducted him to his room.

There they now sat opposite each other. The little dried-up Governor held himself very erect in his huge, Oriental chair, which he only half-filled, kept rubbing the nails of his right hand against the palm of his left, and gazed at Varro courteously and enquiringly. "In this lousy Antioch of theirs," he was thinking, "they still seem to look on our old friend Varro as somebody. But what is he? An unfrocked senator, an outsider. His name cuts no ice in Rome now. Whenever it comes up people rack their brains and ask: 'Oh, Varro, isn't he the man that the Emperor Vespasian struck off the list of senators for some scandal or other? They say he's piled up quite a fortune in Syria.' And he has certainly done that; the state papers show that he has some influence, too, with the potentates beyond the frontier. But what does that amount to? What a downcome for a Roman who once sat in the Senate to dawdle about the ridiculous courts of these native chieftains, these priests and sheiks with their wretched royal titles. And we can meet him on his own ground there too. My predecessors have been too slack. Otherwise this adventurer wouldn't be sitting so brazenly opposite me now."

For Varro was lazily lolling on a couch with his legs crossed in the Eastern fashion, and his expression was good-humoured, almost cordial. He knew very well what the other man was thinking. He knew that Cejonius despised him and yet was secretly afraid of him. That gave him a malicious satisfaction. Yes, sitting there

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he still had the audacity to continue against the wishes of the ruling Flavian house the policy of conciliation with the East which had been begun by Nero. They had axed him; Vespasian had struck him from the list of senators on a shamefully trivial pretext. But they had gained nothing by that. He had simply continued the old conciliatory policy from his Syrian estates instead of from Rome, and the new rulers with their bustling, Roman, militarist methods had been able to do nothing against him. The petty kings, the reigning governors and priestly princes of the states between the Roman frontier and the Parthian Empire saw the real representative of Rome not in the Governor but in him. They had transferred to him the reverence and love which the dead Nero once enjoyed here in the East. It was an invisible rule that Varro had set up, but it was tough and durable. The Government of Syria would have been glad to get rid of him, but burdensome and exacting as he was, they needed his help and mediation if they were not to have constant guerilla wars with the frontier states.

So Varro smiled in his heart as he gazed at Cejonius sitting stiff and rigid in his robes of office with the purple stripes. This new representative of Rome might appear mighty and formidable enough to his new subjects, but he, Varro, could guess how unsure he felt from his pale face and the hectic red spots on his cheeks. He saw with what difficulty Cejonius was maintaining his dignity, and perceived that although he was only fifty he was already an old man, worn out with the perpetual strain of keeping up that dignity, of wiping out the shame of his unfortunate ancestor. An almost genial feeling of pity overcame Varro at this sight. "Poor Cejonius," he thought, "poor school-mate. You don't impress me, you won't find it easy to dispose of me." And Cejonius was thinking, "It's easy for Varro. He enjoys living in

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this rotten East of his, while we have to slave to hold the Empire together."

While they were thinking all this Varro had begun an animated conversation. He congratulated Cejonius at great length on his good luck in being given such a high and richly remunerative post. The only pity was that he had been sent to this accursedly difficult province. Syria could wear down the strength of the strongest man. "At bottom," he concluded with a little confidential laugh—it was as if he had clapped the other man on the shoulder—"at bottom I'm glad that I'm the private citizen and you the Governor."

"So he hasn't got over the fact," thought Cejonius with elation, "that they flung him out of the Senate." "I hear," he said cheerfully, "that you haven't been exactly idle here, all the same." "That's so," Varro good-naturedly agreed. "We're neither of us so old yet that we can simply sit still and do nothing. If I didn't potter about with cultural politics I wouldn't know what to do with my time. And besides, it's no secret that my heart belongs to the East." And reflectively, almost solicitously, he added: "But to you, my Cejonius, you, the true blue Roman, this degenerate Orient of ours must be really trying. If one has no inner understanding of it——" He shrugged his shoulders without finishing.

Cejonius, rigid and erect in his chair, kept rubbing the nails of his right hand against the palm of his left. The red spots on his pale, bony cheeks had grown brighter; he darted a side-glance at Varro, his dry voice quivered. "We must draw a sharp dividing line," he said. "The Roman way of life must be imposed to the very banks of the Euphrates and no foreign influence allowed to infiltrate from beyond it. If a man sees that as clearly as I do, it may be that that in itself gives him an inner understanding of the people and the actualities here."

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And then, to soften the sharpness of his words, he added almost casually: "It's a great disappointment to me, my Varro, that in the work of Romanising our eastern provinces I shall have to dispense with your assistance." "But why?" asked Varro in surprise. "Haven't I done a great deal in that way myself, considering that I am a man with no army at my back?" "I don't gainsay that," the Governor replied courteously. "You have done much to impose the Graeco-Roman forms of life on this province. But unluckily you have also introduced more of the East into that process than any Roman before you." "Yes, perhaps I have," Varro admitted calmly. "And you see, my dear fellow," Cejonius continued, "that has given us to think; we don't like it. And besides," he added maliciously, "it might give you some qualms of conscience if I were to ask you for your advice on certain points. For in this everlasting quarrel of ours with the East how can a man give real Roman advice if, in addition to being a Roman citizen, he is also a subject of the Parthian king and a citizen of the state of Odessa?" "He's well prepared," Varro had to admit to himself, "he's studied my dossier pretty thoroughly. He's still my good old enemy. Quite likely he made a bid for Syria instead of some other dependency simply because I was here."

While uttering his last words Cejonius had drawn himself more erect than ever. Varro contemplated him. "I won't have much difficulty with him," he told himself, "he was always a weakling and always will be. Though one mustn't forget that weaklings like him often let themselves be driven to actions whose consequences are unpredictable simply to keep up their semblance of power." And then the nickname he had been all this time trying to remember suddenly came to him: Jumping Jack. Of course, Jumping Jack. That was what

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Cejonius had been called at school, after the wooden puppets which people carried about during the saturnalia, wooden puppets with animated limbs which could be made to jump up and then fall back again by means of a little lever. They had called him that in ridicule of his attempts to appear more than he was.

Varro was delighted that Cejonius's nickname had come back to him. He adroitly steered the talk away from politics, and enquired assiduously into the private welfare of the Governor, and his sensations as a ruler. It transpired that Cejonius was afraid he might not find it easy to acclimatise himself to the unbridled life of this Oriental town. Daphne, the suburb of Antioch where most of the nobility and the rich merchants had their villas, notorious throughout the whole world for its shameless luxury, was not exactly the most agreeable neighbourhood for a Roman official who proclaimed his adherence to the tenets of the Stoics.

By now the Senator's congratulatory visit to the Governor had really lasted long enough. But Cejonius would not let Varro go and began once more to speak of political affairs. "Tell me, my Varro," he asked, "do you still intend to raise difficulties about the collection of your tax for the inspection of the troops in Edessa, I mean now that I am Governor here, and not a mere stranger?" For the upkeep of the Roman garrison in the city of Edessa, the capital of the nominally independent kingdom of that name beyond the Euphrates, Edessa itself was by treaty bound to provide. But in addition to this the Roman Emperor levied a special tax for his annual "Inspection of the troops beyond the frontier". Now the treasury of Antioch took the point of view that Varro, as a citizen of the Roman province of Syria, was legally bound to pay this Inspection Tax; while Varro held that, having as a citizen of Edessa already paid his

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tax for the upkeep of the troops, he would be paying twice if he paid again for their inspection. It was not a question of the six thousand sesterces involved, which were of no importance either to Varro or to the Government Treasury : it was a question of principle. It angered the Government in Antioch that this man Varro, still in possession of his Roman citizenship though deprived of his senatorial rank, should become at his convenience a subject of Rome or of some Mesopotamian prince. For this reason there had been for a long time a courteous but bitter war over this tax between Varro and the Government of Syria.

Varro once more put forward his old argument, which was already familiar to the Governor from the state papers. Such a double tax was not only legally invalid, it was also politically dangerous ; by means of it the equivocal situation of the Edessa garrison, and its potential hostility to Edessa, would be underlined.

The Governor listened patiently to this long-winded explanation. "That's all very well," he said at last, in the tone of a candid friend. "But in your position I would seriously consider, now that I, a friend of-yours, am in power, whether it wouldn't be better to give up your Mesopotamian and Parthian connections. Perhaps then there might be some prospect of your getting back your former Roman rank."

Varro pricked up his ears. It was great, the way this fellow put his foot in it. "What do you mean by that ?" he asked. "Do you mean that they are thinking of taking me back into the Senate again ?"

Cejonius found that he had been somewhat too hasty and took refuge behind the dry tone of the official. "I have made, I may say," he replied, "a suggestion to that effect at the Palatine, and I had the impression that it was listened to quite favourably. On the other hand,"

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he hastened to add, "I can make no binding promise. But I advise you seriously to weigh my words."

Varro could hardly conceal his jubilation. So the Flavian Emperor and the other parvenus he hated so much realised that they could not get on without him in the East. They were prepared to put him on the list of senators again. Very kind of them. But a Varro wasn't to be taken in by such a clumsy dodge. Once they had him safe in Rome they would expel him from the Senate again in a few months, and this time they would show some sense and settle his hash for good. A senator in Rome. What a cheap bait. And for that they expected him to give up all that he had painfully built up here, all he had done to unite the East and the West, so as to collaborate in the unimaginative policy of Rome's new masters, who wanted to make the West the centre of power in the Empire and build a wall against the East. Thanks, gentlemen. I prefer to remain "the dear cousin of the King of Edessa". I would much rather be the king of Parthia's friend than a noble dummy in Rome.

He thanked the Governor for the efforts he had made on his behalf in Rome. "I hope," replied Cejonius, dropping his chill official tone, "that on these lines we may presently come to an understanding." "I hope so too," said Varro, but he spoke so drily that it sounded like a refusal.

Cejonius now considered the time had come to hint at the other side of the subject. "We must get rid of our dissensions," he said. "Just think, my Varro, how unpleasant it would be if at any time I were forced to take measures against you." "Yes, my Cejonius," replied Varro, concealing his contempt for this empty threat beneath an assumption of more than usual politeness, "that would be unpleasant for us both. For considering the importance which the Mesopotamian

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states, rightly or wrongly, attach to my humble self, any such measure could scarcely be translated into action without a costly military expedition. And what would be gained by that, even at the best? Prestige. And from what I know of the gentlemen on the Palatine, they aren't very set on gaining prestige by paying through the nose for it." He rose, stepped up quite close to the Governor, and familiarly put his hand on his shoulder. "Or am I to take your words as an ultimatum?" he asked with such an insolent smile that the other man must feel the thought that was in his mind; that is, Jumping Jack. For now that Cejonius had tried so hard to win his favour, Varro thought he could safely regard him not as the representative of Rome or of the Roman idea, but simply as Jumping Jack, his school-mate.

It will appear later that there he made a mistake which he could not well afford. For the time being the Governor contented himself with unobtrusively withdrawing his shoulder from such excessive familiarity, and replied politely that his words were merely to be taken as a friendly hint, not at all as an ultimatum. Then, after the exchange of a few polite nothings, Varro was at last able to take his leave.

He left the Government buildings with a light, vigorous step, dismissed his servants and his litter, and walked home on foot through the streets of Antioch. In the last few years he had felt that he was no longer in his prime; but now he felt as full of high spirits as a boy. His enemies the Flavians had done him a great good turn by hanging Cejonius round his neck. It overjoyed him to think that Rome, the grey, militarist, patriotic, narrow Rome of his time which he hated so much, now confronted him in the person of this man Cejonius. "It will be a merry fight," he thought. "Good old Jumping Jack." And he already saw himself as the victor.

CHAPTER II

EDESSA

THE city of Edessa, the capital of the kingdom of that name, and the most northerly of the great Mesopotamian settlements, gleamed on its hills. Seen from the distance, it looked Greek with its temples and porticoes, its circus, theatres, baths and gymnasiums. But once one was inside the walls one came across very few Greek inscriptions and seldom heard a Greek syllable. Its inhabitants were in fact a confused swarm of Syrians, Babylonians, Armenians, Jews, Persians and Arabs, and only the houses were Graeco-Roman.

To the south of Edessa stretched the waste. But the city itself lay in a fruitful tract rich in water, through which flowed the river Skirtos, and the winds from the mountains separating Mesopotamia and Armenia kept the air fresh and pure.

Edessa lay at the intersecting point of many routes. It was a rich city. Through it passed spices and perfumes from Arabia and India, also a great part of the trade in pearls and fine silks. It was famed far and wide for its beautiful buildings. Strangers came from great distances to view the ancient temple of Tarate with the blackened bronze statue of the goddess and her curious priapic symbols, the temple of Mithras, the university, and above

EDESSA

all the labyrinth, a huge grotto in the rock on the left bank of the Skirtos with hundreds of narrow, winding, endlessly branching passages, galleries and chambers.

The origin of Edessa was lost in the beginnings of time. Osroene it had been originally called, the city of the lions. Hittites, Assyrians, Babylonians, Armenians and Macedonians had reigned here. Last of all, three hundred years before, Arabs had made their appearance, and they had maintained their hold on the city ever since. One of the petty buffer states between the Roman and the Parthian empires, Edessa was perpetually menaced by war. But it also extracted considerable advantages from its neutrality; in the constant wars between the two great states it sold itself now to the one, now to the other.

The Arabian princes of Edessa, while remaining at heart Arabs, fostered to the utmost the Aramaic culture, which was considered the best of all cultures in this region. The University of Edessa was beyond comparison the best in Mesopotamia and could challenge comparison even with the academies of Antioch.

The city contained many shrines, and many gods were worshipped in it. Chief of them was the goddess Tarate, sometimes known as the goddess of Syria; to her was dedicated the city pond with its scarlet fishes. Apart from her the bull-god Labyr was worshipped, the god of the labyrinth, and other ancient gods of Assur, among them a lion god and the great Beel and Nebu. Further, the Persian god Mithras, the Arabian star gods Aumu, Aziz and Dusaris, as well as the Greek and Roman deities. Also Jehovah, the Jewish god, had many followers in Edessa; and even his Son, known as Christ, "The Anointed", had already found followers here.

Many thousands of people lived in this beautiful city, some of them white, some brown; Arabian princes and

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their councillors, Greek and Syrian merchants and landlords, Persian astrologers, Jewish handworkers and scholars, officers and soldiers of the Roman garrison; wandering bands of Bedouins, too, were almost always to be found in the streets, and amidst these races flitted a countless, variegated crowd of slaves. All these peoples, white, black and brown, with their cattle, their camels, sheep, goats and dogs, lived in a swarming mass, speaking many languages, worshipping many gods in many fashions, eating, drinking, lying with one another, bargaining, marrying, quarrelling and being reconciled again; none of them could have got on without the rest, each was glad in his heart of the others, and all were proud of their city Edessa, the dearest, loveliest city in the world.

The ruler of Edessa was King Mallukh, the fifth of that name; his chancellor was Sharbil, the High Priest of Tarate; the commander of the Roman garrison was Fronto. But the real power in Edessa was the Senator Varro.

CHAPTER III

THE POTTER TERENCE

AMONG the many enterprises which Varro had set going in Edessa was a pottery factory which he opened in the Red Street for one of his dependents, Terence. That this Terence still continued to act as Varro's dependent was due to sheer devotion ; for he had been for some considerable time a prosperous man, in need of no one's protection. In fact, he had done so well for himself that he was now Grand-Master of the Potters' Guild of Edessa.

Yet his factory was by no means the largest in the city, nor was Terence pre-eminently expert in his craft. The actual work in the factory was supervised by his wife, and the business side was attended to by a Cilician slave called Knops. Terence himself was seldom in the place. On the other hand he was often seen in the streets and the taverns. As Grand-Master of the Potters' Guild he had to be about a great deal and see many people. On occasion he had to interview the magistrates and councilors of King Mallukh about the affairs of his colleagues, also he had to represent the Guild at city functions and organise their annual festivals.

He was a man in the early forties, reddish fair, with a rosy, smooth skin, a broad face, long upper lip, short-sighted grey eyes, somewhat corpulent in body but imposing nevertheless, and very Roman in appearance. The

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Potters' Guild were exceedingly proud of their Grand-Master. Not merely because he was a genuine native of Rome, but more particularly because of his stylish and impressive appearance and the fact that, being a man of many intellectual interests, was a good speaker. He spoke Latin with the fine metropolitan accent; Greek and Aramaic he had also at his command, though he had some difficulty with the sound *th*, which played an important part in both languages. Some people certainly thought that he liked the sound of his own voice too well, and there was no denying that once he was launched on the spate of his eloquence, it was not an easy matter to stop him. But he impressed people, no doubt of it. He had a certain air, and he knew how to converse easily with the great. Sometimes his face would assume an expression of haughty displeasure which quite daunted those who addressed him. He had a distinct talent for public displays. It was to his credit that in the annual shows of the handworkers, particularly in the great March festival, the Potters' Guild always came out best. The fact that he was an educated man greatly helped him here. He knew by heart whole passages from the Greek and Roman classics, could produce apt quotations at a moment's notice, took an interest in the theatre, and the performances he organised for the great annual festival of the Potters' Guild drew vast crowds. All connected with the pottery trade in Edessa were proud of their public spokesman. Even the apprentices preferred to work in Terence's workshops rather than in those of more indulgent masters, though they received many hard blows there.

The impression Terence made on people was heightened by a certain mystery that clung to him and his life. Eleven years before he had arrived in Edessa in tatters, and with a matted reddish fair beard. At that

THE POTTER TERENCE

time he looked like some common fellow whom one might expect to wipe his nose with his elbow, like the Greek worker of the proverb. Nobody could have foretold in that Terence the future Master of the Guild. People who knew Rome related that Terence's workshops there had once had a very good name, the Imperial Court itself had bought his wares ; and it was actually whispered that Terence had had secret and intimate connections with the court of Nero.

Terence himself, his workmen, his wife Caja and the slave Knops held their tongues about his Roman past. Only when he was in a particularly exalted state, after an effective speech or a successful performance by the Guild, would he occasionally hint how trifling such triumphs were in his eyes when he thought of the days when he came and went as he liked in the Imperial Palace ; but nothing more than that was to be got out of him.

What actually happened to Terence in Rome was this.

His father had been a slave in Varro's household. Varro senior had manumitted him and set him up in a pottery workshop. But Terence the son showed little enthusiasm for the work, he was interested in higher things, such as the theatre and politics. When he pronounced on public affairs or on art his friends lauded his intelligence and penetration and declared that he was too good to be a mere potter. So Terence paid little heed to the business during his father's lifetime and none at all after his father's death. The business soon declined. As his income dwindled along with it, his friends presently lost their former admiration for his gifts, and nobody would give him either praise or money for his eloquent periods or his long quotations. No wonder that he who at twenty-two had looked plump, robust and in no way out of the common, should when he was nearing his thirties

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have acquired an unhealthy, bloated, morose, bitter, almost dazed look.

And then an extraordinary coincidence happened. The Emperor Nero's face, framed in its reddish beard, had looked out leanly on the world for a long time ; but meanwhile he had gradually been putting on flesh, and when at the age of twenty-eight he had his beard shaved, his naked face was suddenly changed : it was bloated, blasé and wore a perpetually glum look. Now one day when Terence was paying his customary morning respects to his patron, Varro suddenly realised with a shock that this man and the Emperor were as like each other as two peas. Just like that Nero knitted his brows over his short-sighted eyes ; just like that he pouted his thick lips. And Varro suddenly had an idea. New distractions had always to be found for the exacting Nero ; so Varro took the potter with him to the Palatine and introduced him to the Emperor.

That introduction was a risky business for Terence. If the Emperor chanced to be in a bad humour he was capable of showing drastically his displeasure with Terence for being his double.

But the experiment came off. Naturally Nero did not wish other people to know that his Imperial face existed in duplicate, and he commanded Terence to alter the cut of his hair and to remain at the Palatine until he had grown a beard. But for the rest the freakish resemblance amused him. One visit would not content him. He invited the potter a second time and after that with more and more frequency. He had the man's beard shaved off again and his hair trimmed to match his own, and the Emperor looked on with delight while Terence aped his walk, his gestures, his voice. He corrected the man when the imitation seemed to him imperfect. And then he would have his favourite monkey brought in, so that it

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might take part in the comedy, and while the potter and the monkey strutted about caricaturing him the room rang with the Emperor's laughter.

These encounters with Nero made a deep impression on Terence. He would smile to himself every now and then, a secret satisfied smile. He had always known that the malicious fate which kept him from rising in spite of his genius must sometime relent. He often thought of a dream his mother had dreamt while she was carrying him. In her dream she thought she was climbing a high mountain. The path was difficult, she could feel her pains coming on and wanted to lie down and rest. But a voice commanded her, saying : "Climb higher." She obeyed ; then she grew faint and wanted to rest again, but the voice spoke a second time, and not until she was almost at the summit was she allowed to bear her child. The soothsayer interpreted this dream to mean that the child she was carrying would climb very high in the world. And for that reason they had given him the absurd and pretentious name of Maximus.

At the Palatine it had been impressed upon him that he must keep silent on pain of death about his meetings with the Emperor. Nevertheless the slave Knops guessed or knew something ; for he could not help being struck by the frequent mysterious absences of his master, and still more by the large orders which the Palatine suddenly began to give the little, struggling factory. And it was simply impossible for Terence to keep his secret from his sturdy, alert wife Caja. So at her urgent command he divulged what had happened to him at the Palatine. Yet even to her he seldom spoke, and when he did it was reluctantly, vaguely and never quite frankly. He never admitted to her, and not very often to himself, that these summonses to the Emperor's palace deeply flattered him ; instead, by maintaining a dark silence, he tacitly agreed

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when she raged against the court rabble for insulting his dignity as a man. But in reality the comedy at the Palatine was becoming more and more a necessity to him. His resemblance to the Emperor filled him with exultation ; and in secret he identified himself more and more with his part.

Until there came a sudden reverse of fortune. During the dark days when the Guards rose against him the Emperor sank into a perilous lethargy, and his intimates, to cheer him, summoned Terence to the Palatine. The barber shaved him and prepared him as usual for his part ; but then the Emperor suddenly decided to forsake the palace and take refuge in the Servilian Park. No one thought of the potter Terence waiting in the servants' hall ; he remained quite forgotten in the deserted palace. Late in the night, finding that nobody came for him, the terrified man crept out of the palace and furtively made for his home. The streets were empty ; nobody had ventured out for fear of harm befalling them. Suddenly Terence heard the rattle of swords and crouched back in the shadow, but he was too late ; armed men seized him ; they were troops sent out by the Senate to search for the Imperial fugitive. He assured them with tears in his eyes that he was not the Emperor Nero, but only the potter Terence. But the soldiers refused to believe him ; disgusted by the cowardly behaviour of a man whom they had worshipped for so long as a god, they rushed upon him and almost beat the life out of him. At last he managed to persuade them to take him home. There Caja identified him.

To her these audiences at the Palatine had always appeared sinister. Now in her terror of what the Senate might do to her husband as one of Nero's favourites, she persuaded Terence, still paralysed with fear, to fly at once. At break of day they stole to the house of Varro,

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their patron. The Senator had fled from the city during the night, towards the East, they were informed. They hastily followed him and along with him managed to get across the frontier.

All this lay far behind Terence now, and he lived in safety and a certain degree of comfort in the gay city of Edessa. Caja was proud that she had acted so energetically for her Terence that night and forced him to flee from the perils of Rome. She herself did not feel entirely at home in Edessa, it must be confessed, among all these barbarians. The soiled white robes of these ape-like, dark brown people disgusted her; she did not like the food; she looked upon the Syrians and Greeks as swindlers, the Arabs and Jews as stinking superstitious savages, the Persians as madmen. Never would she lower herself to learn the lingo of these barbarians, the rapid lisp of the Syrians, the guttural stammering speech of the Arabs; never would she adapt herself to this barbaric world, to the garish colours, the sacred fishes, the altar of Tarate with its indecent symbols, the monkeys and the camels, the waste that stretched uncannily to the South.

Terence, on the other hand, acclimatised himself quickly and thoroughly to the East. He worried even less about his business than he had done in Rome; Caja and the slave Knops attended to that. As for himself, he went about with an important and mysterious air, organising the demonstrations of the Guild and making political speeches. Here nobody bothered much about his uncertain pronunciation of the sound *th*; he always found an appreciative and attentive audience. Certainly he liked to grumble before Caja about the accursed East, but when she saw him walking through the hilly streets of Edessa, greeted by many people and returning their greetings with dignity, she felt that in spite of his haughty

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voice far below them in the earth and fled in terror. At the entrance they waited, filled with delicious dread. But when they saw the potter Terence emerging from the labyrinth their terrors found relief in laughter, they parodied his impressive port, his majestic walk, and ran before him jeering at him in portentously deep tones. At that Terence was seized with such shame and disgust, such a sense of the emptiness and hopelessness of his present life, that he felt tempted to rush back into the labyrinth again and end it there.

After this experience he decided to put the Palatine out of his mind for good. With redoubled zeal he set himself to learn passages from the classics, flung himself with desperate energy into the affairs of the Guild, and presently succeeded so well that the memory of Rome very seldom troubled his mind.

CHAPTER IV

JUMPING JACK JUMPS

IN the course of his usual tour of inspection the Governor Cejonius appeared in Edessa towards the end of April to review the Roman garrison, which the city had to support in accordance with their friendly treaty with the Roman Emperor.

During the short term of his office Cejonius's views on the East had merely hardened. People had told him that he would never subdue the East by stern Roman action of the traditional pattern; this country with its eel-like slipperiness would wriggle out of any attempt to grasp it. It could not be denied that good Romans, among them Pompey, Crassus and others, had found the effeminate East more than they could deal with. But though their methods had been too direct at the time, now, with a pacified Syria and seven legions at one's back, one could afford to show a Roman fist to the mangy Orientals. "I am curious to see, my Cejonius," the Emperor Titus had said in his farewell audience at the Palatine, smiling sceptically, "how you will get on with our dear Syria." Cejonius had thrown up his head. By Jupiter, Your Majesty, Cejonius will know how to deal with it.

Edessa received the Emperor's representative respect-

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become," he added in smiling justification, "half an Oriental myself in this East of ours, which means a thorough shilly-shallyer."

But Cejonius insisted woodenly, obstinately: "All the same I must beg you to give me a clear and categorical Roman answer. I have looked into the matter again, and examined the various papers relating to it. Everything that can be said about this business has been said a hundred times already. I have informed my colleagues that I shall not return to Antioch without an unequivocal answer from you."

Varro had now turned slightly pale. That was not Jumping Jack speaking; that was the new Rome. They sat on; Cejonius small and erect on his low, Arabian couch. "And what would you do, my Cejonius," asked Varro, still in a friendly voice, almost smilingly, "if I were to say No?" The Governor compressed his lips. Then in a curt, military voice, but not loudly, he replied: "I regret that in that case I should have to summon you before the Court."

For a fraction of a second Varro was overcome by dazed astonishment rather than by anger. But he pulled himself together at once and told himself to be sensible and logical. "There you are," he thought. "It isn't Rome speaking after all, it's only Jumping Jack. And it has really turned out as I feared in Antioch. Jumping Jack the weakling has let himself be rushed into an error of judgment. He has gone farther than he intended. He can hardly retreat now. He will really summon me before the Court, and if I don't go he'll send his troops for me. That would be a piece of madness, but Jumping Jack would do it. And then we would find ourselves in the craziest dilemma. But I shan't follow him along that road, I must think. I must stick to common sense. Common sense demands that I should yield. I shall yield. This

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time." "Since you, my old friend," he said with ironical obsequiousness, "are so set on it, I shall send you the six thousand sesterces. Please instruct your clerk to make out the receipt."

The two men talked for a few minutes about trifles, then said good night and parted. "You'll pay dearly yet for that six thousand, Jumping Jack or whatever they call you," Varro told himself as he was being borne home in his litter through the hilly streets of Edessa.

CHAPTER V

VARRO CONSIDERS A PLAN

NEXT morning, very early, he sent the Governor the six thousand sesterces. In tense excitement he awaited the return of the messenger. Cejonius had actually accepted the six thousand ; the man brought the receipt with him. Varro examined the document greedily and with curious satisfaction. In a loud voice, smiling maliciously, he read it out : "L. Cejonius, Governor of the Imperial Province of Syria, hereby confirms that he has received from P. T. Varro the sum of six thousand sesterces in payment of the Inspection Tax." Then, without rising from his bed, Varro dictated to his secretary a letter to the Roman Senate in which he protested against the iniquitous double tax. He despatched this letter to Rome by special courier almost before the ink on his signature was dry.

That done, he gave orders to admit the crowd who were waiting to see him. He waved Cejonius's receipt before them, gave it to one or two of them to read, and himself read it out in a ringing voice. "This new Governor," he laughed, "is a great fellow. He would actually have sent an army to fetch me if I had not paid up." He examined the faces of his followers to discover how they reacted to his words. Some laughed to hide their embarrassment, others openly expressed their indignation, but all looked awkward. Varro walked about among them, clapped

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them on the shoulder, and said, staring fixedly at them : "This new Governor is a sharp fellow." Then he scrutinised their faces.

While he was dismissing them his glance fell on a man whom he had overlooked until now. The man was standing in haughty isolation, his brows over his short-sighted grey eyes superciliously drawn up more in astonishment than in indignation, his mouth slightly pursed. Once more, as on that morning fourteen years before, Varro was startled by that proud peevish face with the smooth rosy skin and the reddish blond hair. Yes, the Emperor had looked just like that, Nero, his Emperor, when he wished to show his displeasure at something. Just so had he responded to real or imagined insults when Varro told him of them. Just like that had he pouted his upper lip, as if to say : "No matter what you may do, you'll never get the better of me."

Varro remembered how greatly Nero had delighted in the apelike imitateness of this fellow, how he had made him and the monkey go through their paces for his pleasure ; and he smiled to himself. But he wiped that smile away before it reached his lips, and for the fraction of a second his face froze into a mask.

In that second he saw many things.

Then he turned once more to his visitors. He unobtrusively drew the man with the short-sighted grey eyes into conversation, began to show an interest in him, then a stronger interest. Finally he deployed for the petty Guild Master who lived by his favour all the practised charm which he usually reserved for Oriental kings and high priests and women.

He cunningly elicited all sorts of intimate admissions from the man. Melted the flattered Terence until he was talking to him as he did to his equals, and giving him his views on life, politics and art. Terence's heart belonged

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to the stage. Varro happened to mention John of Patmos, who a long time since had retired from the stage and now lived quietly in Edessa as a private citizen. Terence had seen John playing Oedipus years before in Antioch. He frankly confessed that he had been disappointed by the much lauded art of the man. He himself was deeply interested in the theatre, as the Senator probably knew; he knew whole passages of the classics by heart, he had thought much about Oedipus, and he had a very definite idea, for example, how the great speech should be delivered that began with the words: "What happened then happened with highest justice. None can convince me of the contrary." While chattering on in this way, he was suddenly brought up with a start by his own temerity; he was terrified lest the Senator might laugh at him or at least smile at him. But such was not the case. Varro listened to him with complete seriousness and invited him to dine one of those days and explain his ideas at more length, in particular his views on the right way of delivering those lines of Sophocles.

Though almost dazed with so much happiness, Terence felt a slight touch of dread at the same time. Not that he was surprised at the interest the Senator showed in him; for he was a cultured man with an original mind and interesting ideas. Yet when a man of Varro's rank spoke to him he always felt a slight fear in spite of himself, a slight fear mingled with obsequiousness and a sense of inferiority; after all, his father had been a slave in the Varro household. And now that Varro asked him to dine with him sometime and develop his ideas more at length, he felt beneath his elation a choking dread almost like that which he had felt when Nero summoned him to the palace.

After he had dismissed his protégé, Varro fished out the receipt for the six thousand sesterces again, held it

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away from him at some distance, for he was beginning to grow long-sighted, and examined it exhaustively, letter by letter. On the back he wrote in his tiny script two words : "Gains" and "Losses", and under the first set down "An idea". Then he opened a little secret door in the wall and from the recess took out a casket. The casket was small but extremely valuable, a work by Myrrhon ; upon it were carved the deeds of the Argonauts. Varro carried it with him wherever he went. He opened the casket, took out certain papers, and tenderly stroked them. Among them was a highly personal letter from Nero, also some verses which Nero had dedicated to him, a communication from Vologaes, the late King of Parthia, in which that monarch expressed to Varro his admiration and gratitude for the wise statecraft with which he had helped to put an end to the war between Rome and Parthia. There were also a few hasty confidential lines from Corbulo, who had waged that war for the Romans, had won it and had met a wretched death ; and various other things. To these papers, which were very dear to him, Varro now with a smile added Jumping Jack's receipt ; then he locked the casket and put it back in its place.

Meanwhile Terence returned to his house in the Red Street. He tried to conceal his mingled elation and dread from Caja and the slave Knops, merely informing them with an air of proud indifference how astonished Varro had been by his political and literary observations ; he had actually invited him to dine some day, so that they might converse more at their ease. Caja, that rude sceptical woman, told him to look after himself and not put his foot in it. She had heard that there was bad blood between Varro and the Governor ; the best policy for a nobody like Terence was to keep himself to himself as much as possible. Terence was filled

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with high displeasure at being called a nobody by his own wife.

And she had been quite wrong. His dinner with Varro went off very well. The Senator listened with appreciation to the political views of his protégé, requested him to declaim the lines of the blinded Oedipus, praised his rendering with discriminating taste, and Terence parted from him in high satisfaction.

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he had appeared personally on the stage before his people had also helped to gain him an enormous popularity in Mesopotamia, and even Parthia had been charmed when he promised he would come sometime and show his art in the East. In him they had quite soberly seen a new Alexander, an Alexander who came not to subjugate the East but to unite it and the Occident in one. The new rulers, on the other hand, the Flavian Emperor and his supporters, had never concealed from the first that for them the Orientals were barbarians, good for nothing but to be exploited in every conceivable way. The fact that Rome had sent this man Cejonius to Syria was only another proof of the ill-will of the Government. "Oh, if Nero were only alive still," sighed the people when they gathered in the evening round the fountain or in the taverns.

While such talk was spreading more and more between the Euphrates and the Tigris, Varro again invited Terence to dine with him. This time there was nobody else present. Varro was somewhat silent, he seemed absorbed in thought. He treated Terence with great deference, almost as if he were a man of high rank. He allowed long, embarrassing pauses to intervene. Although Terence liked the ceremoniousness with which he was treated and felt flattered by it, he could not help feeling a certain embarrassment too.

After supper, while they were drinking their wine, Varro suddenly said with a shy confidential smile: "I see that you still prefer your own wine-mixing to all the others." He had had the wine mixed in a fashion once invented by Nero; this blend and its name was one of the few mementoes of the Emperor which his successors had not destroyed after his fall, and everyone, including Terence, knew it and knew its name. Terence looked up in bewilderment. The strange words of his patron and

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the half-obsequious, half-friendly tone in which they were uttered made him feel suddenly awkward, almost a fool. Varro went on in the same obsequious voice: "Perhaps I am being guilty of too great a familiarity, but I simply must give expression to a feeling which has daunted and yet uplifted me for weeks past and has now grown into a certainty. I assure you I am quite aware who it was that fled to my protection after the so-called death of the Emperor Nero."

To grasp the hidden implications of this unexpected declaration would have required a man of quick and keen intelligence, and the potter Terence was not that. Yet Varro's words touched the most secret and profound reality in him, his flaming ambition, his burning regret for the great days in the Palatine. So that while Varro spoke there rose up in him the memory he had tried so hard to suppress, the memory of his grand appearance before the Senate, and the forlorn hope woke within him that that great day might yet return again. Accordingly he grasped the meaning of the Senator's dark saying much more quickly than Varro had expected; he drank it in with all his soul, drank it to the lees. Someone had at last recognised him, someone had seen that a man who possessed so much of Nero's flesh and blood must in truth be Nero.

But even while he was uplifted by the incredible bliss of the moment, his native cunning had already wakened and it told him that he would be wiser to pretend that he did not understand, wiser not to acknowledge his real identity until later. So he put on a stupid expression, replied that he did not understand what his gracious patron desired of him, and stuck to this until Varro began to fear he might not achieve his object after all. Nevertheless he made a last effort. He humbly begged pardon, he said, if he had been too familiar. If his guest considered it too early yet to show himself to the Romans in his glory, or

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if he wished to punish for ever a world that so blasphemously failed to recognise him, he, Varro, in that case begged to be forgiven his over-great presumption in seeking to lift the veil behind which he concealed himself.

And now Terence was terrified that if he did not take his chance it might be too late, and this single opportunity vanish for ever. All at once he no longer looked stupid ; he smiled boyishly, good-humouredly, slyly, as he had often seen Nero smile ; then he strode up to Varro with Nero's stride, clapped him on the shoulder with Nero's hand, and said in the unique, unmistakable, lazily arrogant voice of Nero : "Why, my Varro, should I not forgive you ?"

Now Varro knew that in a similar situation the real Nero would never have spoken like that. He would much more probably have replied with a Greek quotation accompanied by a characteristic wave of the hand, dismissing the whole matter. But the man's action was so astonishing, the dead Nero, his bearing, his voice, his walk, was so overwhelmingly present in the room, that Varro suddenly wondered in alarm whether his idea might not be altogether too good an idea and have consequences impossible for him to foretell. He pulled himself together and, all at once sobered, said to end the matter : "Well, my dear Terence, so that is that." For the rest of the evening he was the great gentleman again and addressed Terence as his dependent, affably and soberly.

But the potter Terence had seen what he had seen and heard what he had heard. He was so sure of his ground now that Varro's sudden change back into his former self could no longer damp his confidence.

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the borders of Syria. He would cross into Syria carrying dissension with him, but return to independent territory again at the right moment, where he could be secretly or perhaps even publicly supported. What could Antioch do against him? Could they send an army into a foreign country? Even Jumping Jack would think twice about that. There had always been endless haggling between the powers over every Roman and Parthian soldier that was allowed upon the territory of the little buffer state. The distance between the Euphrates and the Tigris was not great. If Rome sent troops across the Euphrates, they stood the risk of encountering other troops from beyond the Tigris.

Varro got up. In his bare feet he went over to the wall and fetched out the casket. He took out the receipt and read in a loving voice for the hundredth time: "L. Cejonius, Governor of the Imperial Province of Syria, hereby confirms that he has received from P. T. Varro the sum of six thousand sesterces in payment of the Inspection Tax." He stroked the receipt, smiled, locked it up again, put back the casket and returned to bed.

Should he risk it? The joke was a good juicy one with many possibilities, but cursedly dangerous. In fact it was no joke. Was this receipt the real cause behind it? Was Jumping Jack? Or his own private feelings? No, the whole East was involved, his marvellous, corrupt, wise, degenerate East, which these brutal, narrow-minded sergeant-majors on the Palatine must not be allowed to trample under their feet.

Varro thought of the time when he had first come to Syria as a young officer in Corbulo's army. He had been constantly in the presence of the famous general at that time. Corbulo was a sham, all things considered, he had neither sound instinct nor a keen mind; but he was deeply convinced of his own capacity, he could give

VARRO DECIDES TO RISK IT

orders like no other general, he was a master of the art of acting with self-evident authority. Varro had learned many things from him. On the other hand, he had soon seen through Corbulo. He had realised that the quickest way to win his favour was by unstinted admiration, and he had won it. Presently he, the raw beginner, was prompting the famous and experienced general, and actually deciding his policy in Syria. It was during these years that Varro's passion for the East had been born, his longing to rule there. He had discovered enormous pleasure in bargaining with these Oriental kings, priests and merchants in their flowery, long-winded fashion, and counteracting their devious devices by devices still more devious. Actually since Corbulo's time it was he who had ruled in these countries.

Varro stretched in his bed and assembled his thoughts. He remembered how the Flavians had tried to finish him off eleven years before. One night in the Peacock Brothel behind the Great Circus he had, as a drunken jest, dressed up one of the whores in the purple and buskins of a senator; and because of this the Emperor Vespasian had decreed that he was no longer worthy of belonging to the Senate. That ironical pretext had been merely one of Vespasian's jokes; he had always been fond of rough, uncivil jokes. Well, the Flavians, the dead Vespasian and his son Titus, had had to pay in all sorts of ways for that joke. The two of them had been made to see that a resourceful man could achieve more from Edessa than from Rome. And now they had sent this dolt, this Jumping Jack, to disturb the fine equilibrium of Eastern politics. Well, Jumping Jack could be prepared for a number of surprises. Once this Nero was recognised in Mesopotamia, perhaps Jumping Jack would realise that it might have been wiser not to squeeze that six thousand out of his old friend Varro. Jumping Jack would have to

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realise that here in the East little was to be gained by "energetic measures" and "Roman discipline", and that it would have been better to follow his old friend Varro on the path of conciliation.

Where were his thoughts straying to now? Was he really concerned with Jumping Jack? No, he wanted to have a go at that insolent, stupid new Rome of theirs, by conjuring up Nero again, the man whose memory they could not abide.

At this point the face of Terence rose in his mind. Curiously enough he had not thought of him all this time. He remembered how the fellow had strode over to him, suddenly transformed, with Nero's stride, and how he had said to him in the unmistakable lazily arrogant voice of Nero: "Why, my Varro, should I not forgive you?" The discomfort he had felt when Nero had suddenly appeared in the room in the guise of that wretched mechanic once more stole over him. But then it occurred to him that Nero himself would have been delighted with this joke at the expense of his enemy Titus, and his discomfort faded.

He stretched himself again, satisfied. Then he summoned his secretary and instructed him to arrange an interview with King Mallukh and the High Priest Sharbil.

CHAPTER VIII

AN EASTERN KING

KING MALLUKH received Varro and the High Priest Sharbil in a lofty chamber furnished in the Arabian fashion where he always held his consultations. Carpets hung on the walls, a fountain plashed, the three men sat on low couches. Both the quick-witted Varro and the lively old High Priest found it hard to remain placid and dignified. But they knew that King Mallukh would actually have liked to sit cross-legged on the floor after the fashion of his people, lazily listening to the fountain, and allowing still longer and more contemplative pauses to intervene between question and answer. The watchman had already drawn back the curtain thrice and announced the hour, and they had not yet come to the point.

"It's a pity," the High Priest had just declared, "that Parthia should be so much weakened at present by these wars for the throne. As long as a part of King Artaban's army is tied up in his struggle with the Pretender, Rome will make us feel that we have no first-class power behind us."

Varro gazed at King Mallukh attentively. The handsome man with the soft brown eyes, the hooked fleshy nose and the beautifully curled and crisped beard was sitting as still as an image, tall and stout, and one could not tell whether he had even heard the High Priest's

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words. Perhaps he was lost in a dream, as so often happened. For three hundred years these Arabian princes had ruled over the city of Edessa, they were familiar with Graeco-Roman and Parthian culture, but King Mallukh's heart had remained with his Arabs, as everyone knew. He had little love for the work of government ; he loved his army more, his women still more, his horses still more than that, but most of all the wilderness. Sometimes he would ride out with a small escort into the waste that lay to the south of the city. In his secret heart he was of the same mind as the nomad races, who considered it beneath them to sow or to plant, build huts for themselves or settle anywhere ; for if a man enslaved himself to such comforts he must be prepared to endure a ruler over him to safeguard them, and thus he lost his liberty. And to the Arabs freedom was the highest good, and as freedom was to be found only in loneliness, the wilderness was their chosen home.

So who could tell whether King Mallukh, as he sat there immovably, the circlet of gold softly gleaming on his hair, might not be thinking of the desert or of his women and horses, instead of the political matters in which Varro and Sharbil were seeking to interest him ? But it seemed that he had been listening. For after a suitable pause he opened his lips, which looked very red framed in his black, curled beard, and said in his fine deep voice : "The star god Dusaris is shooting arrows of dissension against the East. That is the reason why there is discord in the house of Parthia, so that Prince Pakor has grown insolent and will not acknowledge his rightful King Artaban."

Relieved that the King had been listening, Varro ventured to say : "Many people are probably sorry that the western stars are not also standing at the sign of dissension. Many people might consider it a good thing if a similar claimant were to rise in the Roman Empire

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out his neck at Varro, and squeaked in his high spiteful voice: "And what if the man who claims this is a swindler?"

Before Varro could answer, the watchman appeared for the fourth time to announce the hour, and King Mallukh ordered him to bring wine and confections; in his eyes it clearly seemed undignified to talk without intermission of politics, and while they ceremoniously sipped and nibbled he began to speak of the hunt. That done, he just as abruptly took up the thread of their former talk again. "Can my lord and cousin Varro tell me," he asked, "what consequences would follow, if the man who makes this claim should not be a swindler?" "Your Majesty's devoted servant Varro," replied the Senator, "can in all humility give a clear and exact answer to that question. In that case all the edicts which Rome has issued since the supposed death of the Emperor Nero would become invalid, and only those would remain which existed when the Emperor Nero disappeared and was lost sight of." At this the King and the High Priest gazed silently and intently at the Roman senator for so long that at last, used as he was to the ways of the East, he began to feel uncomfortable. "This little man," said Sharbil at last in his shrill, old man's voice, "that Rome has sent to Antioch is as stubborn as a mountain goat. It is unlikely that he will tolerate any rival of the Palatine, whether that rival should be genuine or fraudulent."

That was the most he would say, nor did King Mallukh add anything to it. But Varro knew that there was no need to point out to them the great advantages which would accrue to Edessa from the appearance of a pretender to the Roman throne, whoever he might be, if he could only succeed in maintaining himself for a while. From such a pretender they could demand all sorts of privileges as the price of recognising him; and from Rome they

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could demand a high price for not recognising him. As these pleasant possibilities were clear as the day, it was superfluous to mention them.

Instead, the conversation reverted to the struggle for the throne in Parthia. Of the two claimants Artaban was the more gifted and the more powerful, and he had crushed all resistance in the west of Parthia, which adjoined Mesopotamia. It would be madness to support the other claimant Pakor, even though he possibly had the more legitimate claim, as well as more style, more native majesty.

A very important question for Edessa was which of the two Parthian claimants would be recognised by the Roman Government. Rome's trade agreement with Parthia was coming to an end, and the Governor in Antioch would have to decide very quickly with whom he was to negotiate the renewal of it, with Pakor or with Artaban. It would not be pleasant for Edessa if Rome recognised Pakor instead of Artaban. They talked about these questions in measured, flowery periods until the watchman announced the fifth hour. Then King Mallukh made a sign that he considered the audience ended.

Before Varro left the High Priest Sharbil summed up his views, which were certainly those of the King as well : "If Rome recognises our Artaban, then we can have no reason to doubt the legitimacy of Titus. But if Rome should decide for Pakor against our Artaban, then Edessa might regard with considerable satisfaction the reappearance of the Emperor Nero." But that he expressed himself in a manner so brief, lucid and trenchant was due simply to the fact that he was a very old man and had not much time left.

CHAPTER IX

A FATEFUL DECISION

IMMEDIATELY after this interview Varro left Edessa. He had not invited Terence to his house again.

He returned to Antioch. He took with him the casket containing the papers that were so dear to him. In Edessa he had flourished his receipt for the Inspection Tax before everybody, but when he reached Antioch he seemed to have quite forgotten his humiliation at the hands of Jumping Jack. He did no business, took no part in politics, but instead plunged into the mad pleasures of the great city. He spent most of his time in the luxurious suburb of Daphne, where the most expensive whores of Asia resided in fine villas; Daphne was the place for which all the petty sinners of the world yearned in their abandoned dreams.

Varro's daughter, the pale austere Marcia, was filled with shame for her father, whom she admired and loved.

On the few occasions when Varro met Cejonius, he acted the good-natured school companion who pitied his old friend for having to slave away at his burdensome state post, while he himself snatched what enjoyment he could get before he was beyond the age for it. He did not seem to bear Cejonius any grudge for the business

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of the Inspection Tax. He frankly admitted that he had complained to Rome. He had done that, he explained, simply because otherwise he would have lost all authority with his Orientals. But with that the matter was ended as far as he was concerned. To squabble over six thousand sesterces wasn't worth the while of a man of fifty-one, who had seen many things in his life and still had many more to see.

Cejonius did not quite believe in these naïve protestations. He sometimes regretted now that he had gone so far as he had ; but he told himself that, if not now, then later, he would have had to show this degenerate semi-Oriental that he was the Roman Governor. Yet he could not rid himself of a certain feeling of discomfort when he met the other man. It was reported to him that in spite of his wild life Varro had found time to carry through enormous business transactions, and had got rid of a great part of his Syrian estates at a considerable profit. Cejonius could not but accord a certain secret admiration to this man who flung himself into senseless enjoyment and at the same time attended to his intricate business affairs with the greatest skill. The man was dangerous.

It seemed advisable to make friends with him again. Such a changeable fellow should be treated alternately with sugar lumps and cudgel blows. He decided to make good his severity in the matter of the Inspection Tax by a striking mark of confidence. He invited Varro to a consultation.

Varro came. Cejonius swallowed his pride and explained the reasons for his behaviour in the tax business. If it had merely concerned their two selves, himself and Varro, he explained—and one could see how hard he found it to say this—then he would of course have yielded the point. But the prestige of Rome had been at stake,

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and the prestige of the individual had to give way to that. "You must see that, my Varro," he said. "Even though you are the King of Parthia's friend," he added in a wry attempt to give his words a jocular turn.

But Varro had no intention of seeing it. He gazed at Cejonius amiably and expectantly. Then, as he was sitting close to him, he moved his heavy chair back a little so as to see him more clearly. In his heart he hoped Cejonius would make him an offer, would tell him that he had thought the matter over again and resolved to pay back the six thousand. Varro knew how fantastic was the project he was about to embark upon, and if Cejonius had offered him his hand now he would have taken it and given up his plans. So he waited. But Cejonius considered that he had already gone far enough. The words he had just uttered amounted in reality to an apology, and an apology from the Imperial Governor to the shady adventurer Varro would have to suffice. So he too waited. For a minute, and then for another. And as he remained silent and Varro remained silent, the fate of both men was decided during these few minutes, and more fates than theirs.

With the pedantry of the true bureaucrat, Cejonius invariably carried through what he had once decided upon, and so he now proceeded to give Varro the proof of confidence by which he hoped to win him. "My Varro," he said, "as an old friend you once offered me the benefit of your expert advice in Eastern affairs. May I now take advantage of that offer?" Pleasantly surprised, Varro answered: "With all my heart."

"The treaty with Parthia," said the Governor in a worried voice, "has run out. With which of the two claimants should I treat? Which of them should I recognise? Pakor or Artaban? It is obviously to our interests to act in such a way that Parthia will remain

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weakened by dynastic dissensions. But I cannot postpone the renewal of the treaty any longer. For which of them should I decide?" And he made a second attempt to treat the matter lightly, and added with painful jocularly: "Of which of the two kings of Parthia are you the dear friend, my Varro?"

Varro rejoiced in his heart. This was the very point to which he had wanted to bring Cejonius. He had come to Antioch in the hope that Cejonius would ask him this very question, and if Cejonius had hesitated for another week, then, much against his will, he himself would have been forced to bring up politics. The business could not have turned out better.

He hastily reviewed his ideas again. If Cejonius declared for Artaban, then (the Edessa people were quite right) there would be no point in supporting any longer the man who called himself Nero. Then the potter would become a potter once more, Cejonius would remain the Imperial Governor, master of seven army corps and of the most important province in the Empire, and would never change back into Jumping Jack again. So Varro must induce him to recognise Pakor and not Artaban. He had often gone over the arguments by which to convince Cejonius of this. But now he took a daring decision and suddenly renounced his carefully rehearsed arguments. During that short silence he had recognised his old school-mate more clearly than ever. He saw how furiously the man hated him, and how deeply he distrusted him. Cejonius would do the opposite of what he advised. He would advise him to recognise Artaban and to turn down Pakor.

He did so.

Until then Cejonius had hesitated whether to decide for Artaban or Pakor. There were countless reasons for the one step, and as many for the other. He gazed into

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Varro's face, saw the full, sensual lips, the wide, brazen forehead, the lazy bearing of the man. He hated that man, and by Jupiter that man hated him. Pakor? Artaban? The man advised Artaban. The man acknowledged that Artaban was his friend. He would decide for Pakor.

CHAPTER X

PATIENCE IS REQUIRED

THE potter Terence felt strongly tempted to tell his wife Caja of his conversation with Varro and prove to her, who had called him a nobody, that other people considered him anything but that. Yet he knew that he would endanger his triumph if he divulged it prematurely. So he restrained himself and went on as before occupying himself with the affairs of the Guild.

But Caja knew her Terence very thoroughly. He might pretend to go about importantly, he might behave as if he were quite absorbed in the ordinary business of his life. But she noticed from countless little indications that there was something on his mind, an overwhelming preoccupation which absorbed all his attention. Something must have happened. His intent expression when he thought he was alone, his dreamy looks and yearning sighs, his restless slumbers, the lightening and darkening of his face; all this reminded her of his behaviour during the days when he had visited the Palatine.

However, Terence's dreams of glory did not last long. It was true that in Edessa and in the rest of Mesopotamia people were speaking more and more of the happy times of the Emperor Nero. They sighed and groaned over the enormous burdens which the new Governor was laying

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upon them, and said more and more often that this sort of thing could not go on much longer, the end was bound to come soon, the Emperor Nero was still alive and some day would appear in glory and once more bring freedom and prosperity to the people of Mesopotamia. Terence greedily drank in these rumours, but that lightened very little the torment of waiting. For by now weeks and months had passed since Varro had last sent word to him. The Senator seemingly considered it expedient to keep Terence dangling. Since the man had bitten, better to play him on the line for a while, so that he mightn't become too uppish. So Varro remained in distant Antioch, a great gentleman raised far above the potter Terence, unattainable. No message came from the Senator Varro to the potter Terence.

It was no easy time for Terence. Often he doubted whether that evening could have been real, whether the great Varro had really spoken to him as man to man, more, as one might speak to the Emperor Nero himself. He would have given anything to discuss the matter with Caja. But he knew that she would say he was imagining it all or else that Varro was planning a new, dangerous and humiliating game with him. And Terence did not want to be told that; for he would not have been able to go on living if it were so.

So he concealed as well as he could his confusion of mind from the clear, inquisitive eyes of his wife. More and more greedily he spied round him to see if Varro were really the only one who recognised him as the Emperor Nero. But he could find no sign and it cost him more and more pains to remain the stately Terence, busy and important, always certain of himself, whom he had been only a few weeks before.

He made one external concession to his dreams. The Emperor Nero had been in the habit of using an emerald.

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to look through, for he was short-sighted. Terence bought himself an emerald. It was no simple matter to hide from Caja the encroachment on the till, and he did not quite succeed. Naturally he never showed the emerald to anyone. He practised looking through it when he was alone, put it before his left eye, then before his right eye, and was delighted with its green glitter.

When this failed to drive away his melancholy, he took refuge from his doubts in the labyrinth. There in the darkness of one of the chambers he listened unto himself until his inner voice, his daimon, addressed him and assured him that he was Nero and that everyone would sometime recognise him.

But for the time being they did not recognise him, and Varro remained silent. Finally Terence could stand it no longer and wrote a letter to him in Antioch. The letter was couched humbly as befitted a communication from a dependent to his patron. Terence reported certain happenings in his factory, little events that had occurred in Edessa and in the affairs of his Guild, but towards the end, and this was the only reference to their interview that he dared to make, he inserted a dark hint that perhaps in a short time he might not need to trouble his patron with such matters, for the gods would bring about a change in his fortunes of which he had sometimes dreamed. He read over this letter and found it more than tolerable. Now Varro was bound to speak his mind. If Varro intended to continue what he had begun that night, he would have to give some answer to this dark hint; if he did not propose doing so, then he would simply assume that it was one of those equivocal, flowery phrases so loved in the East, and ignore it. If he did that, Terence would simply have to relapse into the ordinary life of Edessa again. But that was impossible. Varro would understand and would answer.

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The next few days passed with dreadful slowness. Many letters arrived from Antioch, some of them actually for Terence, but none from Varro. Terence fixed a term for himself within which Varro must answer. Six days at first, then ten, then twenty. He told himself again and again that patience was required. He quoted, to keep up his spirits, countless verses from the classical poets to that effect. He recited them to Knops his slave, before whom he could let himself go more freely than before his wife. He told Knops that the day would soon come now, a thing he had often told him before ; and grimly clinging to his hopes, his short-sighted eyes stubbornly and gloomily fixed, he recited more to himself than to Knops the beginning of the Homeric verse : "The day will come". And when Knops stared at him in surprise he could no longer restrain himself, drew out his emerald, stared more insistently at Knops and repeated in a louder voice : "The day will come."

The slave Knops shrank back from the green fires of the emerald, but he was clever and asked no questions ; nevertheless he took in greedily the strange gestures and the strange words of his master and thought of them for a long time afterwards.

Knops—the name signified wild beast as well as savage, and Knops always insisted that his name should be properly pronounced with the long Greek o—Knops was a thin man who looked much younger than his years. As a child he had been taken into Terence's family ; a failing debtor had given him to old Terence in lieu of payment. Knops had been born in Cilicia and felt at home in the East. He was a sly, servile fellow with shifty eyes. For Terence, whose obsequious junior playmate he had been, he always evinced an envious admiration. He admired in Terence his haughty arrogance and his blind trust in himself ; but he also hated him for these essentially

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Western qualities. Knops managed the business in the Red Street, and if Terence's factory had prospered rapidly in Edessa, then he was to be thanked for it. In all probability he had pocketed a good deal of money for himself in spite of the keen eye Caja kept on him ; but his services could not be calculated in monetary terms. Actually Terence should long ago have given him his freedom, according to the usual custom ; and many people asked themselves why Knops, since his master had refused him his freedom, had not long since taken it himself. For instance, at the time when Terence was forced to flee after the death of Nero the intelligent Knops could easily have made his escape without any fear of being pursued by his master, since Terence himself had every reason to remain in hiding. If Knops continued to stick to him, then it could only be because he had a superstitious faith that his master would yet rise high in the world and that his fidelity would then find its reward.

So that when Terence full of quiet, grim confidence recited the Homeric verse : "The day will come", his slave did not take these words as a mere empty boast. Instead he at once connected them with the rumours that the Emperor Nero was still alive. Of the great change to come Terence had already spoken during the time of his mysterious absences in Rome, and he had made the promise that as soon as that change took place he would give Knops his freedom. And in spite of the length of time that Knops had had to wait, he was not yet tired of waiting, and now his heart took fire at the thought that the change would happen soon and then his favourite dream would be fulfilled ; he would settle somewhere here in the East as an independent business man, exult over his friends, jeer at them and make rude fun of them.

On the evening of that day Knops went to call on one of those friends, his familiar gossip, the master-potter

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Gorion. He was in the habit of spending the greater part of his free time with Gorion. This Gorion was a man belonging to the aboriginal race. He was fat, with a round head and little sly eyes, and a great love of talking ; he was always gesticulating with his hands. Unlike Knops, he did not devote his chief energies to work, but filled his days inquisitively pursuing every rumour, sitting about with his countless acquaintances, grumbling and tittle-tattling slyly and credulously, consumed with interest in the many political changes of his city. He greeted every new change with fresh delight, and then deplored more loudly than ever the good old days.

The fathers and forefathers of this Gorion had lived in the country from the beginning of time, had seen Babylonian rulers come and go, followed by Assyrian, Greek, Roman, Persian, Arabian rulers, and had accepted their new masters as they accepted sun and hail and flood. They had sighed and been patient. They had clung to their soil, nourished themselves as best they could, begotten children, worshipped the goddess Tarate and her fishes, tilled the soil sufficiently to keep themselves alive and pay their conquerors the toll extorted from them by kicks and blows. The foreign princes and rulers had vanished, the fathers of Gorion had remained and he with them. Now he grumbled and bore his lot as they had grumbled and borne theirs.

Now Knops was honestly fond of this Gorion, partly because he felt flattered that Gorion, a free man, should like his company, partly because he knew he was superior to him in business skill, knowledge of the world and intelligence. Knops had for long regarded with the interest of a connoisseur Gorion's twelve-year-old daughter, little Jalta, and he had made Gorion promise to give him Jalta in marriage when the great change arrived and he ceased to be a slave. To-day he was convinced that the

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change would come soon and he gave himself up to lascivious dreams of what he would do with little Jalta on their first night. But Jalta's father raised his finger half-jokingly and half-threateningly at Knops, the slave from Cilicia. Thereupon Knops retorted that he would sleep with Jalta whether Gorion allowed him or not. Gorion was displeased at that and retorted even more sharply, pronouncing Knops's name with the short o. Whereupon Knops, trusting in the words of his master, grew quite outrageous and replied that he would sleep not only with Jalta, but also with Gorion's goddess, Tarate. This last extravagant insult to his favourite goddess enraged Gorion so much that he flung his full cup of wine into Knops's face ; it was no great loss, however, for the wine was sour.

Gorion expected that Knops would answer this insult with a flood of curses. But nothing of the kind happened. The slave simply wiped the wine from his face without visible offence and said quietly : "You take care, Gorion. This same Knops that you despise so much may some time be the friend of a great ruler." And he brought out these words with such gravity and composure that the potter Gorion fell silent.

And when in the course of the evening Knops once more asserted that the change might come soon, Gorion did not pass over these words as a mere empty phrase, but kept them in his mind and thought of them for many a long day.

CHAPTER XI

SOMETIMES THE CROOKEDEST WAY IS THE STRAIGHTEST

IF Varro kept Terence dangling, he himself had to exercise patience. While he continued his wild life in the villas of Daphne, he waited with ever-increasing tension to discover if Cejonius would declare for Pakor. But Cejonius kept postponing his decision.

Varro resolved to stimulate him. He kept telling everyone how important it was for Rome to institute proper relations with Parthia and recognise Artaban ; he knew that people would carry his words to Cejonius. Also he again took out of his casket the receipt for the Inspection Tax and showed it to everybody in Antioch, making biting comments on the Governor's self-righteousness and thirst for power.

But most important of all, working from the suburb of Daphne he put in circulation a new name for Cejonius, the witty nickname of his old school-mates : Jumping Jack. The name delighted the satirical population of Syria, it was quickly given a suggestive meaning and spread like wildfire over the whole East, until the name of Cejonius was forgotten in that of Jumping Jack. When the Government by a public decree forbade the employment of this nickname, the people's wit found a way out and in the taverns and the streets songs were sung, con-

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taining pauses which could be filled only by the words Jumping Jack. Wooden dolls with movable limbs were also offered for sale in tens of thousands, puppets which by means of a little lever could be made to jump up and then fall back again; and they found many buyers. Varro actually distributed a number of these wooden puppets among his guests at a banquet he gave. Cejonius must declare for Pakor.

It pierced the Governor to the heart that this nickname of his boyhood, which had long been forgotten in Rome, should now sting and torment him anew in the East. He was still more annoyed that he had made things worse by his edict. His counsellors had advised him against it, had represented to him that the clever sarcastic East would find thousands of ways of getting round the law. He had refused to believe it. Now he saw the result: he had only underlined his defeat.

When he and Varro met his first concern was to justify the edict and explain that he had not acted out of mere vanity. If the people, he explained, had merely wished to insult him as a man with that fatuous nickname, he would have let them do so. But the insolent, rebellious, Oriental rabble were using the nickname to bring discredit on the whole Empire. The prestige of Rome was at stake, consequently he had to use every means he could to restrain these people. Varro listened to him politely and sympathetically. He replied that the prospect looked black to him; by such measures as these Cejonius would never get very far in the East. The people of Antioch found nicknames for all their rulers, play-actors, charioteers and athletes; they regarded that as their privilege, and nobody hitherto had questioned it. It was wiser to let dogs bark than goad them to bite. If he might advise Cejonius, he should handle the people here in such a way that the nickname would slowly lose its malicious sig-

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nificance and take on an affectionate one. And he stepped back so as to see the other man's face more clearly, then tried the word over, experimentally, uttered it three times, let it roll complacently on his tongue: "Jumping Jack, Jumping Jack, Jumping Jack."

Cejonius sat on in vexation, scratching the palm of one hand with the finger-tips of the other, and for the fraction of a second angrily glared at Varro with his hard blue eyes. He knew, of course, that this was the man who had brought up his old nickname. It had been stupid to try to justify himself to this fellow whose sole aim was to turn him to ridicule. Varro knew what Cejonius was thinking. He was exultant. Jumping Jack would not recognise Artaban. Jumping Jack himself would raise from the grave his old enemy Nero.

He took the initiative. He anxiously enquired if Cejonius had not yet decided which of the two Parthian claimants he would recognise. Then he urgently reiterated his advice that Cejonius should decide for Artaban.

Cejonius coldly answered that he had already given Varro a chance to express his opinion, and he, Cejonius, had duly considered his friend's arguments. He estimated highly Varro's expert knowledge, but there were other experts and well-tried ones who held the opposite view. He did not doubt Varro's goodwill; but perhaps in this case he was involuntarily speaking as the friend of the great King rather than as a Roman; the great King Artaban, he added with a touch of mockery. It was a critical decision, and he was not acting for himself, for he was responsible to the Emperor, he concluded importantly.

Varro pretended to be astonished and dejected. Then he triumphantly left the palace.

Three days later the Governor announced officially that he would deal with Pakor as the King of Parthia for the renewal of the treaties.

CHAPTER XII

TERENCE'S SECOND TRANSFORMATION

THE term which Terence had set for himself was over. But he did not give up hope. A week passed, then another. At last came a letter from Varro.

It was a long letter. Terence ran through it anxiously and intently. Varro had not written in person. He replied through his secretary. Soberly and at length he went into every business detail that Terence had mentioned, and Terence's heart sank. But behold, at the end of the letter was a postscript, and that was in Varro's own handwriting. Varro hoped, ran the postscript, that the gods might soon bring about the change of which Terence wrote. An enormous, blissful wave of pride uplifted Terence. But he had practised patience, had learned to control himself. This time he would not let himself go before anyone, not even before the slave Knops. But he did not part with Varro's letter, he always carried it about with him. Sometimes when he was alone he would draw it out and read the postscript, again and again, countless times. Sometimes he would fly with his happiness to the isolation of the labyrinth. There, in one of the remote dark chambers, seen by nobody but the bats, he rose to his full height, stretched out his arms, smiled foolishly and blissfully, and, as once in the Senator Varro's house, felt he was completely the Emperor to the smallest trick of his walk, gesture and voice.

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The Senate had long before this given instructions that all the monuments and busts of the despised and shamefully murdered Nero throughout the Roman Empire should be flung down and all trace of them destroyed. But beyond the frontier, above all in Mesopotamia, many of these busts and statues were still intact. Varro had had a whole collection of them brought to Edessa. They stood and lay about now on one of his estates in the neighbourhood of the city, some stored in large sheds and others encumbering the neglected courtyard; several of them were already falling into decay under the supervision of a young, semi-idiotic slave who was incapable of more important work.

Now one day Terence happened to find himself on this estate in the course of an ordinary country walk. The young slave admitted the stately Roman gentleman without further ado. Terence strolled about among the blocks of stone which perpetuated the features and memory of Nero. There the dead Emperor lay, stood and sat in a hundred postures. The broad face with the short-sighted eyes and the strong jutting lower lip gazed out with haughty boredom above the stately, somewhat fattish body, or stared majestically over a breast-plate decorated with the head of the Medusa. In some statues the face was bare and in others framed by a well-trimmed beard. Into certain of the faces eyes had been inserted, grey glittering eyes of more or less costly precious stone. A few of the busts were coloured, they showed the smooth, rosy complexion of the Emperor, his reddish fair hair and deep red lips. Terence strolled about among the statues. He gazed at them all, stopped before many, drank them in, gave them life from his living memory, felt so closely identified with them that at the end he could not tell whether these statues represented himself or someone else. Before one wax bust in particular he remained for a long time. He pulled out

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his emerald. Yes, this was Nero-Terence as he had been fourteen years before. He stood looking at the bust, drinking it in to the smallest detail, staring at it with short-sighted eyes and contracted brows, his head haughtily advanced, his lower lip pouted, his whole expression dissatisfied, impatient, very proud. He stood like that for a long time.

Meantime the young slave had withdrawn to a corner of the courtyard. From there he shyly and inquisitively watched the strange gentleman and his curious behaviour. But while Terence was standing before the wax bust the boy's face suddenly changed and he shrank still farther into his corner. And when the stranger at last tore himself away from the bust and left, reeling slightly from his long absorption, the boy rushed up to him and flung himself down and beat his brow on the ground, as Orientals are in the habit of prostrating themselves before their gods and kings.

Terence hastily left, terrified and elated in his very heart. So now it had actually happened. Even the illiterate, the mentally defective recognised him and the fate to which heaven had called him. An enormous exultation took him by the throat, almost stifling him. It drove him through the countryside as if he were drunk, drove him far from the town to the point where the waste began. Once, on a little rising, he stopped. He shrugged his shoulders with the languid haughty gesture of Nero, then let his arms fall and almost ironically repeated the words of the Greek tragedian: "Now stand fast, earth. When before now have you borne a greater mortal?"

He could not bear to see the workaday face of Caja or Knops now. He plunged into his labyrinth and listened for his daimon. And the voice made itself heard, telling him: "Greeting, Caesar. Upwards. Ever upwards. To the stars, Caesar."

CHAPTER XIII

A DISGUISED PRINCE

IN Edessa meanwhile people were talking increasingly of Nero and how happy they had been under his rule, and wondering whether he had really escaped and would presently appear. And when it became known that Jumping Jack had not recognised Artaban but Pakor as King of Parthia, their longing for the dead Emperor and their indignation against Titus and his representatives grew more violent than ever. Pakor ruled in the distant eastern borders of the Parthian Empire, while the regions that adjoined Edessa were held by Artaban. If hostilities broke out between Rome and Artaban the first fighting would take place on the territory of Edessa. The people of Edessa did not want a war. Wasn't it enough that Rome was ruining their trade by the enormous tribute it exacted? For whom did they slave to grow their oil, wine and corn? For the foreigner, the insolent conqueror from the West, for Rome. Oh, if the good Emperor Nero were only alive again. Under him it had been easy to get on with Rome, they had done good business with Rome, and each side had profited. Nero had let them keep their old Eastern gods too, their Tarate, Mithras, their Arabian star gods. Why should the capitolinian Jupiter and the goddess of Rome count for more than Mithras and Tarate, the goddess of Syria? What kind of

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god was it that demanded from people nothing but work and ever more taxes? The fishes of the goddess Tarate were far less greedy than the eagles of Jupiter. The soldiers of the Roman garrison became aware of black looks. "Jumping Jack's bullies!" people cried jeeringly behind them, and if one of them chanced to walk through the streets of Edessa alone at night it was not good for his health. A pile of animated wooden puppets, enlarged gigantically, was burnt in the public square amid the howls of the populace. And it was everywhere said that Jumping Jack's fine reign would not last much longer, the Emperor Nero had come, he was in Edessa, presently he would show himself and give Jumping Jack something to think about.

Many people wished that Varro had been there; one could have picked up hints from him regarding the political situation, but Varro most annoyingly remained in Antioch, unattainable, drowned in the delights of Daphne. Although all sorts of curious rumours were flying about Mesopotamia, it would have needed a very fine ear to detect behind them the voice of the Senator.

Varro remained invisible, but another Roman, a mysterious person, appeared. A courier arrived at the temple of the goddess Tarate with a large sum of money; it was a thank-offering sent for the Emperor Nero's rescue from great danger, but the courier refused to divulge the name of the donor. The same mysterious courier presented to the susceptible King Mallukh, as a gift from the invisible Nero, two beautiful young female slaves. The King and the High Priest hesitated to accept these gifts. But as the sum of money was very large and the two girls very pretty they ended by taking them.

Even when they were alone King Mallukh and the

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High Priest Sharbil employed the most flowery and circuitous forms of speech in their political consultations. In veiled hints they discussed the re-emergence of the buried Emperor. "It might be useful to know," said the King, "what a certain prominent Roman is thinking at present about this Emperor, and how reliable the grounds are on which his thoughts repose." "That same Roman," replied the High Priest, "is at present pouring out the vigour of his heart and his loins in the brothels of a western city." "The gods have given him breadth of vision," answered the King, "and assuredly from the brothels of the West he can see what is happening in this East of ours." "It is possible," responded the High Priest. "Yet if one were to send a messenger he could get hold of this man and make him speak. Only the earth is quite dumb." "Edessa is old," the King reflected, "and will yet survive many an empire ; and patience is good." "I myself am old," the High Priest complained in a shrill voice, "and I am not made of earth and stone like Edessa."

Whether because of the mysterious present from the Emperor Nero or of the people's imagination, the rumours that Nero was not dead became more definite, and it was asserted with confidence that he was now in Edessa.

The potter Terence greedily drank in these rumours. But he did not let any sign of his eagerness be seen. He was now sure of himself, and he found little difficulty in remaining patient. With a sound instinct he decided that it was best to keep quiet and let the situation ripen of itself.

And indeed a great many things were happening without his help to bring about his elevation. The circle within which the Emperor could be found was narrowing ; and it was now located definitely in the Red Street. People confidently maintained that the Potter Terence was not what he made himself out to be.

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Terence's acquaintances now began to show a certain diffidence when they encountered him, strangers pointed him out in the streets, people whispered after he had passed, and if he suddenly looked a passer-by in the face he was pretty sure to encounter either embarrassment or respect. He observed all this with deep satisfaction, but he went on behaving as if he saw nothing, and paid no attention to the halo that was being woven round him. If anyone tried to question him he simply drew his brows together in astonishment and stared at the questioner with his short-sighted eyes.

Even the slave Knops gained by the mysterious homage which people accorded his master. His friend Gorion still ventured to chaff him obsequiously now and then, but if the name Knops chanced to escape his lips with the short o of the Edessa dialect instead of the desired long o, he hastily corrected himself. Knops was delighted that the day for which he had waited so long, on which he had staked his life, was now at last almost in sight. Being an intelligent fellow, he saw that his best line was to maintain that the Emperor Nero, during his last mysterious meeting with the potter Terence at the Palatine, had exchanged roles with him. Besides, by doing this he could present to his master the face that his master wanted to see. He did not alter his actual bearing. The rascal bore himself towards the Emperor as he had behaved before towards Terence, confidentially, devotedly, humbly, impudently, as the indispensable manager of the factory; except perhaps that he was a shade more humble and a shade less impudent.

And as a result of the behaviour of the people round him, the behaviour of Terence too began gradually to change, and this happened against his intentions and against his will. He did his best to go on ignoring the strange things happening about him, but he did it in

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such a way that everybody must recognise that he expressly wished to ignore them. Now he was no longer the potter Terence, but a mysterious personage whose pleasure it was to play at being the potter Terence.

If everybody else entered into this game of the potter Terence, there was one who did not : Caja. She decided to speak her mind and talk him out of his silly delusion that he was a great man.

Only a few weeks before it had been one of Terence's greatest pleasures to bathe luxuriously at one of the public bathing resorts. There he would meet his acquaintances and in grave tones outline to them his views on political and literary matters. In the last few weeks he had ceased doing this, and he now preferred to take his bath in the poky and uncomfortable little bath-room in the Red Street, without external diversion. There, lying in the pleasantly warm water, he gave himself up to his dreams, spoke to himself, sang, recited, and then, naked or in his bathing-robe, practised those arts of majesty which the future expected of him. And thus, in his bathing-robe, the emerald held to his eye, his chin and lower lip proudly pouted, Caja found him as she entered the steamy room resolved to carry out her intention. Fat and robust she confronted him, and the two of them filled the little room. She told him to his face the game that was being played with him, told him that the people who were playing it were not doing so for the sake of his fair hair and grey eyes, but for dark and dangerous ends, and that he was again being made a contemptible pawn by men who would leave him in the lurch if things went wrong. And how could they help going wrong when a potter of Edessa set himself up against the Roman Empire ?

Terence turned away his face and let his bathing-robe fall. He sat naked on the edge of the bath, dangling his

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legs in the water, his back turned to her. He remained silent. She went on scolding him. She reminded him of the dreadful night when his eagerness to fit into the plans of other men had nearly cost him his life. She reminded him how he had always returned from the Palatine drenched in cold sweat. He still remained silent. And as she did not stop he began to put on his clothes, whistling to himself.

CHAPTER XIV

TWO ACTORS

IN a bare room in a dilapidated house in the southern quarter of Edessa a man was sitting over a manuscript ; it was John of Patmos, the actor of whose representation of Oedipus the potter Terence disapproved. It was the middle of the night, the whole street had for long lain in darkness, and only in John's room was the lamp still fitfully burning.

John had glanced over the manuscript that afternoon. His half-grown son Alexai had brought it ; one of his Christian fellow-believers had secretly slipped it to him. It was a Greek translation of a tragedy which for some years had been much talked about ; its author was said to be the great poet-philosopher Seneca, and its theme was the disastrous and much-pitied fate of Octavia, the first wife of Nero, who had been banished and then put to death by the tyrant. John had once read this tragedy in the Latin original, and it had deeply moved him. For a long time now, ever since he had joined the Christians, he had held it sinful to show any interest in profane books. But when his son brought the Greek version of the tragedy into the house that afternoon, he had been unable to resist casting a glance at it. He had intended merely to run through the manuscript, not actually read it, and

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he had presently laid it aside again by a supreme effort of self-control. In the evening, so as to fix his thoughts on sacred things, he had taken up one of those prophetic books which were regarded by him and his fellow-believers as divine. Now these Sibylline books pointed by many dark indications at Nero, the Anti-Christ, whose rule was to precede the destruction of the world and the Last Judgment, and these gloomy prophecies instead of taking his thoughts off *Octavia* merely brought them back to it again. He once more took up the play, although that was a sin, and now it was the middle of the night and he was still reading, in spite of himself, its beautiful eloquent lines.

One who knew nothing about him might have expected to find the celebrated actor in any other place than this bare room in Edessa. The truth was that his art was no longer enough for the great artist. He had seen much misery in the cities of Asia Minor, and the question : "Whence comes suffering, and how can it be swept from the world ?" had begun to agitate him even more than his art. He was a Jew by birth, but the answers which the Jewish doctors gave to this question contented him as little as those of the Greek philosophers and the teachers of the Stoa. He sympathised more and more with the tenets of the new sect who called themselves Christians. Their teaching that poverty was blessed and that this life should be denied for the sake of a life beyond the grave, their dark prophecies of the approaching destruction of the world and the Last Judgment, the gloomy passion of their sibylline and apocalyptic books filled him with an excitement which was both sweet and awful. He began to believe, tested his belief, doubted, believed more strongly, doubted again, but still believed. After a long struggle he renounced the fame and riches which his art brought him, and for some years now had lived in this

city of Edessa on the verge of civilisation, in voluntary poverty and humility.

His new faith had demanded a still greater sacrifice from him : that he should renounce his art. The Greek dramas represented man in conflict with the gods and with fate, they glorified that conflict and their heroes boasted : "There is no living thing greater than man." Could one accept the glad tidings of humility and at the same time pay lip service to these presumptuous Greek poets ? John was grimly forced to admit that that could not be done and that his fellow-believers were right when, in spite of their tolerance in other matters, they condemned his profession. So that he had not only to renounce the fame and wealth which the stage brought him, but his very art along with them. Yet the tragedies of the Greeks, those of Sophocles above all, were too deep in his blood for him to cut himself off entirely from them. He had brought with him into his poverty his best-loved books. There they stood now, the precious rolls in their splendid coverings, and they looked strange in the needy room. Again and again, in spite of violent self-reproaches, John had taken them out and fed his eyes, his ears and his heart on the glories of their verse.

So now he was sitting far into the night over the manuscript of *Octavia*. The light of the smoky lamp flickered against one side of his face, leaving the other in shadow. His appearance was neglected ; but his great seamed face with the heavy brow, the gloomy eyes, the strong nose, the tangled beard which he had allowed to grow in these years of retirement, would have struck anyone in the midst of a thousand other faces. With intent eyes he read on by the feeble light.

And suddenly something happened. Suddenly his God sent him a thought that made him rise and pace up and down the room. The fact that young Alexai had

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brought this book into the house, the fact that the prophecies of the sibylline books had induced him to read *Octavia* again; in this he perceived a sign. Never before had he read such a savage condemnation of Nero. It was no mere chance that the book had reached the house when the belief was growing that the Anti-Christ Nero, that great cruel monster, was still alive and would soon appear and drown the earth anew in blood and abominations. God wished that he should bear witness. If he were to act or recite this drama, that would not be a vain deed or a sin, but an act well-pleasing in the sight of God.

He paced up and down the dark, bare room. His son Alexai wakened and stared at him with apprehensive sleep-drunken eyes. John's lips were moving. He let the lines of *Octavia* rise in his mind, and his lips sent them rolling through the room in a first tentative rehearsal. Word and cadence seemed to come of themselves. The wise, measured lines of Seneca, the wild, proud, pitiless lines of Nero, the terrified cries of Poppaea, the furious exclamations of Agrippina, the piteous words of the chorus uplifted him. His desire to bear witness to God, his hatred of the tyrant Nero, his irresistible longing to intoxicate himself again with his art—all these melted in him into one desire and flowed into the verse. Yes, he could recite this tragedy of *Octavia* publicly without violating his conscience. God willed it.

He announced that he would give a recitation of the *Octavia* of Seneca in the Greek version, in the Odeon in Edessa.

The announcement roused great excitement in the city. The famous John of Patmos, who had not appeared in public for years, was actually going to give a recitation in Edessa, and he had chosen that highly sensational play, *Octavia*.

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When John appeared on the stage the tiers of the Odeon were filled with a tensely expectant crowd. The officers of the Roman garrison were there along with all the well-wishers of Rome in Edessa. But the loyal supporters of Titus noticed with uneasiness and displeasure that there were also many known enemies of the Flavians among the audience, adherents and manumitted slaves of Varro, at their head his steward Lenaeus. Indeed, the man Terence himself and a number of his friends in the Potters' Guild were actually there too.

John had shaved off his beard and robed himself festally as the ancient custom required. His olive face with the powerful brow and the melancholy brown eyes looked strange, rising over his long, flowing white robes. He began to recite the play. He gave out in his deep, full, practised voice the indignant verses in which were described the ruthless cruelties of the Emperor Nero. His voice ranged from a delicate whisper to a crystalline hardness, and could render every variation of hatred, pity, pride, fury and dread. These people from beyond the Euphrates, unaccustomed though they were to great acting, were keenly impressionable nevertheless. John of Patmos roused the admiration even of those who disliked the play. There was silence in the great amphitheatre while he spoke. Now and then a sudden sharp sigh could be heard; some kept their eyes fixed on the speaker's mouth, others sat with bent heads intently listening. When John at last reached the end, too soon for most of them, they tore themselves from their ecstasy and took a deep breath. Then the applause burst like a storm. "Greeting, John of Patmos, good and great artist," came the shout from all the tiers.

But then the chorus of praise was cut across by other shouts, which presently grew louder and clearer. Those who had been applauding grew uneasy. At first they

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fancied they could not have heard rightly. But soon they realised they had heard rightly. For here, in the midst of these loyal officers, landowners and business men of Edessa, all of them devoted to the Emperor Titus and Rome, several hundred and presently several thousand people were actually raising their voices and bawling the secret thought of the mob: "Greeting, good and great Emperor Nero."

Nobody could tell later how the demonstration had started; for it was certainly distasteful to the greater part of the audience. Perhaps this is the explanation. The crowd had been stirred by the art of the great actor, their feelings demanded a vent, demanded to be heard, they felt an imperious need to shout. And as the shouts for the actor were already subsiding, while the cry: "Greeting, good and great Emperor Nero" was growing wilder and wilder, many people were carried away by it and joined in.

Nobody now had any attention for John. They all stared, some in open-mouthed admiration, others in astonishment, others in bewilderment, others in apprehensive dislike, at the man for whom these shouts were clearly intended, a simply dressed man sitting inconspicuously in one of the humbler seats. And suddenly everybody in the great amphitheatre saw more clearly than the most eloquent speech could have made them see it, that here in truth was one who wore the face and the port of the Emperor Nero. For the man sitting there was no longer the potter Terence, but a man who, in the torments of his loneliness, had filled himself with the spirit of the vanished Emperor and transformed himself into him. He quietly sat there, smiling, absent, almost childish, a little blasé, yet very proud and majestic. And while the shouts rang out more loudly, saluting him as Emperor, he got up slowly from his place without

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change of countenance, as if the acclamations were directed at someone else. But in front of him a path opened, he strode between two rows of respectfully bowing people, proud, his head high, an absent smile on his face. Among the Roman officers were some who had seen and actually greeted the Emperor Nero while he was alive, who had beheld Nero with their own eyes. A shiver ran down their backs as they beheld this Nero, and many felt almost tempted to pay him the mark of honour that is reserved for Emperors alone.

Some of Terence's friends were walking a little distance behind him. He turned his head, obviously with the intention of saying something to them. Silence fell on the great amphitheatre, but just as he had not heard the shouts before, he casually remarked over his shoulder, as if he did not hear the silence now, and still with the same faint smile: "Really Nero must sometime have the pleasure of reciting this play *Octavia* himself." And quite casually he added: "What an artist would come to life again then."

Now the whole world knew that the Emperor Nero was much more anxious to be known as a great actor than as a great ruler, and the whole world also knew that Nero was supposed to have uttered as he died: "What an artist dies in me." So that when this man who walked with the walk of the Emperor turned his head with the gesture of the Emperor and said: "What an artist would come to life again then", and that in the voice of the Emperor, a shiver went through the three thousand people present, and even those who had started the demonstration believed now that it was the Emperor Nero in person who had left the theatre.

CHAPTER XV

A GALLANT SOLDIER

FRONTO, the commandant of the Roman garrison in Edessa, being a prudent man, had made the excuse that his presence would be inexpedient and had stayed away from the recitation of *Oclavia*. Immediately after the performance his officers told him of the acclamations which Nero-Terence had received and waited tensely to hear what he should say and whether he would tell them how to act. But Fronto disappointed them. He asked one or two questions, then thanked them politely and dismissed them.

When he was alone he sat down at his writing-table and thought. He was a handsome man of forty-eight, and he sat on motionlessly, his head with the broad brow and the closely shorn, iron-grey hair lightly supported on his hand. What should he do? One might take action at once against this Nero without waiting for instructions from Antioch, and become a sort of Saviour of the Fatherland. One might also take this Nero's side and become a little Caesar. If Varro, for instance, had been in this position, lots of things would be happening now. Fronto saw the possibilities just as clearly as Varro could have done. But simply because he was Fronto nothing would happen. He would confine himself to drawing up

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a correct report for the benefit of these idiots in Antioch, ask for their instructions and wait.

Wait. That unluckily had become the motto of his life. Fronto was accounted one of the most gifted officers in the army. The portions of his *Manual of Military Art* which were completed were highly esteemed by experts. But although he had taken part in the Parthian and the Jewish wars, he had never had an opportunity to put his theories into practice. If a fascinating tactical or strategical task arose, it was always given to some dunce, some mediocre well-intentioned officer ; and he had perpetually been fobbed off by the ill-will of the high command or by some malicious accident. His fellow-officers called him the pen-and-ink soldier. For the Flavian emperors, who themselves were nothing better than good, well-meaning officers, his theories had been too daring and too modern. They had never sent him to the west or the north, where there were all sorts of opportunities for a soldier, but had relegated him to the periphery of the circle, to a *cul-de-sac* of the East.

Not that his residence in the East was disagreeable to Fronto. He had come to these lands as quite a young man ; the profundity, confusion, licentiousness and incalculability of this region and its ancient civilisation had taken his heart from the beginning. He had flung himself with all his soul into the political ideas of Nero, and was an enthusiastic believer in the union of the East with the Roman Empire. But when Nero died and the new masters of Rome reversed his policy, Fronto had not had the pluck to quit the service and proclaim his political convictions. He loved the East, he was convinced that only through Nero's policy could Rome really increase its power and its territory ; and the sober, unimaginative western policy of the new masters of Rome was an abomination to him. But when the Flavians came into

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the Palatine, and ever since had followed his own policy.

Although Fronto had not the slightest scrap of proof, he felt certain that Varro was somewhere behind Nero-Terence. From the moment when he had first heard of the appearance of Nero he had assumed that Varro was behind him. He had known the Senator from his early youth. They had come to the East together, had rapturously shared the marvellous new experience which the East had meant for them. Now they stood in opposite camps. He, Fronto, represented in Edessa the sober, military methods of the Flavians, while Varro continued by a thousand subterranean channels the daring, proscribed policy of Nero. Fronto envied and admired him for his energy, his passion, his intensity, though his reason told him that Varro was wrong. In his official relations with Varro he showed that reserve which was fitting in an officer of the Flavians when dealing with such an equivocal person. But whenever he could he let the other man know that he sympathised as deeply with him as ever. Also he took care in his reserved, gentlemanly but unmistakable way to pay court to Varro's daughter, the pale, austere Marcia. He did not know and did not wish to know to what extent his interest was an interest in Marcia herself, and how far it was a pretext for getting into closer touch with Varro. But of one thing he was certain, that Varro was the man to whom he felt most closely drawn in this part of the world. Varro was a man possessed and Fronto felt that he must come to a bad end. If Varro's daring came off that would be a refutation of Fronto, an eternal reproach which would poison his old age. Nevertheless he was in his heart Varro's friend. He waited to see what would become of the man, waited confidently for him to come to a disastrous end, with an exciting expectation in which desire and dread were curiously mingled.

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Would the appearance of Nero bring about that end ? He, Fronto, could help to hasten it, or to delay it. It was a temptation to show either the one man or the other, Jumping Jack or Varro, that he had that power. But no, he would do nothing against Varro, Varro was a good fellow, he liked Varro. He would leave fate to prove that he, Fronto, had been right after all and the other man wrong.

Therefore he would take no step against Nero.

Would he risk his own skin by doing nothing ? Could the people in Rome or in Antioch find any pretext against him if he did nothing ? No. The potter Terence had not committed any punishable offence. Could he help it if people thought they saw in him the dead Emperor Nero ? Besides, like his master, Terence-Nero was not only a Roman subject but also a citizen of Edessa. Clear and incontrovertible proof of a definite offence must be produced before Fronto could proceed against him. With a faint, malicious smile Fronto summoned to his memory the instructions which the Flavian emperors had drawn up for their officers : "In case of doubt it is better to do nothing than something rash."

Therefore he would do nothing. He would send a report to Antioch and ask for instructions. He was curious to see what instructions the idiots would send him. He knew quite well how Nero and the people behind him could be crushed. In no circumstances must force be employed. As the people of Edessa were convinced of the reality of their Nero, one must gently and cautiously pull up the roots of their conviction ; otherwise it would grow more and more luxuriantly. But as the people in Antioch had already ignored his tentative advice on several occasions, he did not feel obliged to give Jumping Jack any pointer in the present case. Instead he would confine himself to a sober report and look on not without

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enjoyment while the clever, ingenious Varro flung further obstacles in the way of that stiff-necked martinet Cejonius.

Fronto's reflections had now reached their conclusion. He summoned his secretary and began to dictate his report to Antioch.

Scarcely had he begun when a hasty note from the High Priest Sharbil was handed to him. Sharbil urgently begged for an immediate interview.

In some excitement Fronto betook himself to the High Priest's house. The old man described in flowery terms the disagreeable dilemma into which Edessa had been put by the events in the Odeon. The city was like a mule seeking out its way on a mountain path in a thick cloud ; one false step and it was lost. Granting that this man was really the Emperor Nero, how could the city refuse to accord fitting marks of honour to such an exalted guest ? But if the man was a fool or a swindler, was not King Mallukh in duty bound to arrest him at once as a common criminal ?

Fronto listened courteously and patiently. His keen eyes under their wide brows remained fixed on Sharbil's mouth. Fronto was used to the methods of the East, for years he had observed with the curiosity of an expert the turnings and windings and shifts of King Mallukh and the High Priest ; he felt certain that Varro was in league with them and that the acclamations in the Odeon had not occurred without their secret connivance. So he listened intently to find out what the old man was after. For the moment he replied as vaguely and ceremoniously as Sharbil that it was not fitting that he, an insignificant Roman officer, should express any opinion, far less give utterance to advice, on such a ticklish situation.

Sharbil observed that his distinguished friend was too modest. Something must be done. Hesitation was good, but if one hesitated too long things went bad, like

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over-ripe fruit. King Mallukh feared that if he did not intervene, his inactivity might excite the disapproval of his high ally, the Governor in Antioch. He therefore thought of putting this man, whom so many people took to be the Emperor, in a place of safety. Inconspicuously. He thought of posting armed men outside the man's house ; then later, when the situation had clarified, these armed men might be regarded either as a guard of honour or as warders. In other words, King Mallukh wished to keep the man for the time being in a sort of honourable custody. But he would not do that without Fronto's consent, so that if the man really turned out to be the Emperor Nero his action might not be interpreted later in Antioch or Rome as *lèse-majesté*.

Fronto was deeply astonished. Sharbil's proposal sounded quite straightforward and honest, indeed, surprisingly so. Could Fronto have been deceived? Was neither Varro nor King Mallukh behind this Terence? Could the whole business be a fool's adventure, mere megalomania? But against that was the fact that the affair had grown so slowly, methodically and purposively. Sly as he was, Fronto could not make out what the High Priest could have in his mind. But whatever that was, Mallukh's action absolved him of all responsibility. He lauded the wisdom and the loyalty of the great King of Edessa, then reflectively returned to his room and sat down to finish the report.

But he had scarcely dictated a few lines when a new and still more urgent note from the High Priest arrived. In great embarrassment and sorrow Sharbil informed him that the men who had been sent to the problematical Nero had not found him at home ; it appeared that he had betaken himself to the temple of the goddess Tarate and now claimed the right of sanctuary.

Fronto whistled through his teeth. The temple of

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Tarate was a recognised sanctuary. The authorities of Edessa could not break into that sanctuary, nor could the Romans if they did not want the whole East to rise against them. Now he saw clearly why Sharbil had so urgently begged for that interview. The High Priest had wanted to prevent him from seizing the man, and meanwhile had conveyed him to the sanctuary of the goddess to secure him thoroughly. But all in such a way that Rome had no handle against Sharbil. The interview with Fronto was intended to provide Sharbil with a sort of alibi. For he had announced King Mallukh's intention of seizing the man (though in that he was going beyond his duty), and holding him for the disposal of the Roman governor. If this Terence, or whoever he was, meanwhile fled to the protection of the goddess Tarate, then Sharbil and his master King Mallukh were absolved of all blame.

Fronto smiled his appreciation of this piece of Oriental cunning. There would be a fine rumpus in Mesopotamia now. "Jumping Jack will have to jump properly," he thought in excellent Latin.

Sometime before the High Priest Sharbil had thought the same thing in excellent Aramaic.

CHAPTER XVI

THE GUEST OF THE GODDESS TARATE

So now Terence found himself in the temple of Tarate, in the innermost chamber, the cell where stood the ancient image of the goddess, her altar and her indecent symbols. Ever since the acclamations in the theatre he had felt uneasy and had made up his mind to vanish into the labyrinth until Varro arrived and cleared up the position. And when presently a man appeared whose fine robes disguised but poorly those of a priest of Tarate, and charged him to fly at once to the sanctuary of the goddess, he obeyed without hesitation and in blind relief ; he now felt that he was in good and powerful hands.

He expected that the High Priest would be present to greet him as the guest of the goddess, assure him of her protection and receive him with dignity. But nothing of the kind happened. They left him alone in the small uncomfortable cell and in complete uncertainty. Sharbil, just like Varro, apparently considered it expedient to keep him dangling, so as to make him more amenable.

Night came, an uncomfortable night for Terence.

The temple of Tarate was very large. To spend the night in its outer courts would not have been much of a hardship ; there was something to look at there, the little pool with the fishes of the goddess and countless

white doves sacred to her. Even the temple itself was endurable, although one could have imagined a more comfortable place than the gigantic chamber with its ancient, blackish-green pillars. But Terence did not know whether the protection of the goddess extended over the whole temple or only over the cell with the altar and the images. And that cell, into which a faint glimmer of the moon and the stars pierced through a tiny hole, was uncannily small, and there Terence was oppressed by dreadful visions. He stretched himself on the topmost step of the altar, being very careful to touch the altar itself with one hand; he had a vague idea that anyone who wished to claim the protection of the goddess must hold on to her altar or image. At either side of the altar rose in the dim moonlight the symbols of the goddess, gigantic stone representations of the phallus. And above Terence's head, in a niche over the altar, stood the blackish-bronze immemorial statue of Tarate herself. She wore a mural crown, her naked breasts stuck out sharply, her body ended in a fish's tail. In one hand she held a spindle, in the other a tambour. Out of her thin, immemorial yet young face with its closed eyes she smiled down at her guest, gentle, equivocal and pitiless.

As the night advanced Terence began to shiver with cold. The feeling of security which he had felt at the arrival of Tarate's messenger faded. How long were they going to leave him here in this humiliating fix? Why did not the High Priest come to greet him? Where was Varro? And why did they leave him here in uncertainty and alone if they really wanted him to be the Emperor? And was he really safe here? Perhaps they had lured him into an ambush. Rising fear shook him, rage against these people who had led him astray, who had tempted him into this mad adventure and into this

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place, and he wished from the bottom of his heart that he had Caja with him or the slave Knops.

He took refuge in his faith in himself. He assumed the shape of Nero, he was the Emperor, exalted high above everybody else. That was better. Nobody could do anything against him, he was the Ruler of the World. From outside came the crooning of the sacred white doves, who seemed to have been disturbed by something; through the hole in the roof glimmered the moonlight, and the goddess smiled mysteriously and pitilessly down at him. It was a shame to every Roman that he, the Emperor, should have to fly to the protection of this equivocal goddess and her indecent symbols. But he regretted this thought as soon as it came to him, for Tarate might regard it as blasphemy, and he was in her hands.

He felt deeply enraged against John of Patmos. That man had brought him to this fix with his silly recitation, and besides he, Terence, could be a far greater artist than the measly Christian, if he chose. The Oedipus of that fellow; it was falsetto through and through, never rang the bell. And if John really understood art he must know that he, Terence, was greater than he pretended to be. The people with their sound instinct had seen it straight away. Only the snobs, these tin-pot soldiers of Titus and their paid creatures, refused to acknowledge it. And he had to hide here because of them.

But that would not go on much longer, the day would come when he would smash all his enemies. He made a list in his mind of the chief supporters of Titus in Edessa, and he naturally added to them the people whom he disliked for personal or other grounds, people with whom he had had private differences, trade rivals, colleagues in the Guild who depreciated his importance. In the

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end it turned into a pretty long list. He asked himself whether he should include Caja, that impudent doubter. But he did not pursue the thought and came to no decision. Instead he pictured to himself the long-drawn delicious tortures by which he would avenge himself upon those whom he regarded as his sworn enemies.

He shivered more violently. Then he got up and walked to and fro, still on the topmost step of the altar, so that he could touch it immediately if Fronto's soldiers broke in to seize him. A faint, sweet and sickening smell rose from a runnel before the altar designed to draw away the blood of the sacrifice. He would remember this night for a long time. That night when he escaped from the Palatine as the soldiers sent by the Senate broke into it, and this night ; these up to now had been the worst stations on his way.

But this night would end. Day would come. The day would come. His mother's dream had come true ; he had already climbed the hardest stretch of his road, for the beginning was always the most difficult part, and when day came, when this cursed glimmering moonlight was gone, then everybody would realise who he was. He stood, his lower lip discontentedly pouted, the Emperor. He put the emerald before his eye and regarded critically and challengingly the image of Tarate. It did not impress him, her whole temple did not impress him. When his time came he would build differently. He would erect gigantic monumental edifices, he would set up on a still more colossal scale his colossal statue in Rome, from which the head had been hewn. He would carve his image out of the mountain itself, as the ancient kings had done, and this labyrinth, his labyrinth, he would make into a burial chamber, a mausoleum, and it would be the eighth wonder of the world.

But the goddess smiled down at him gently and

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pitilessly, and he was overcome by fear of his own greatness.

And now he felt the call of nature. Yet was afraid to make his water in the cell itself. Who knew, perhaps they would construe that into an insult to the goddess, and if he desecrated the temple he might lose his right of sanctuary. But his natural need tormented him more and more. Finally he crept behind the altar and satisfied it there, much relieved and at the same time filled with an overwhelming fear.

Towards morning, quite exhausted, he wrapped himself more closely in his robe and lay down, firmly resolved to sleep on the topmost step, pressed close to the altar. He sniffed again to see whether there was any trace of the smell left in the room, repeated some lines of the Oedipus to lull him to sleep and at last actually fell asleep.

When he awoke his limbs were stiff, but it was warmer now. There were people in the cell. He shrank back in alarm. They were not Romans, however, but young priests of Tarate bringing the morning sacrifice, a kid. Crouching in a corner, he gazed at them with pale looks; perhaps they would discover traces. But they went through the service without paying any attention to him. After they had consummated the sacrifice, they poured streams of water over the altar to purify it, and now all danger was over.

The day advanced. More priests came to the cell. They inquisitively regarded this man who had fled to the altar of their goddess. Nobody addressed a word to him. Terence had once more assumed the indifferent expression which he generally wore.

He breathed more freely when at last the High Priest Sharbil arrived. This man was bound to bring some decision, whether for good or evil.

Sharbil assumed that Terence would now be suffi-

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ciently amenable. To welcome the guest of his goddess he had put on his full priestly regalia ; the golden pointed priest's cap crowned his ancient, bird-like face. Reverentially he greeted the protégé of Tarate, stretching out both arms towards him with his hands open. Terence replied to the greeting with equal respect.

Then the High Priest assured Terence of the goddess's protection. Terence gave no sign of his relief and thanked the High Priest politely and indifferently. After many flowery phrases, Sharbil asked : "May I beg you, guest of the goddess Tarate, to make known your name to her priest?" He said this in Aramaic, and Terence was relieved ; for the foreign language gave him a pretext to reply hesitatingly and vaguely. "The goddess knows my name," he said. "Are you, O Lord, the Emperor Nero?" the High Priest then ventured to enquire. That was discourteous and perhaps not altogether diplomatic either. But the High Priest Sharbil was very old and had not much time left, and he was inquisitive. But Terence did not let himself be trapped into a foolish answer. "I am," said he, "that which the gods have made me."

In his heart he was deeply relieved that he did not have to assert with his own lips that he was Nero, and that he could safely leave that to other people. But Sharbil thought : "That's a clever man. He almost deserves to be Nero."

CHAPTER XVII

JUMPING JACK AND THE ORIENT

WHEN it was reported to the Roman Governor Cejonius that many people in Mesopotamia held that a certain potter called Terence was the dead Emperor Nero, he had shaken his head and laughed, amazed at such foolishness. How could people be taken in by such an open fraud? That showed you again what barbarians these people beyond the Euphrates were.

When Fronto reported next that the potter Terence had sought refuge in the temple of Tarate, from whence the Romans could not fetch him without violating their treaties and without very serious danger, he was more amused than disturbed, and it surprised him that his councillors should take the absurd incident seriously. Politely, ironically and a shade haughtily he wrote to King Mallukh requesting him to give what assistance he could to Fronto, according to the treaties between the two countries, in securing the lawful arrest of the Roman subject Terentius Maximus. He had heard that the said Terence claimed right of sanctuary with the goddess Tarate. If a man whom the authorities of Edessa were pursuing took sanctuary in a Roman Temple in his own territory, then he, Cejonius, would try to starve the fellow out or smoke him out; he had no doubt of the

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success of such a stratagem. He would be obliged to his friends in Edessa, therefore, if they would look to the matter as quickly as possible.

Most of King Mallukh's councillors were Arabs, they venerated the Arabian star gods, Aumu, Aziz and Dusaris and did not worship the Syrian goddess Tarate. Nevertheless, as they read the Governor's letter they knitted their brows at the disrespectful tone in which the Roman spoke of the favourite goddess of the Syrians.

Mallukh and Sharbil were sitting in the large room hung with carpets. There were long pauses between their sentences; the fountain plashed. "This Western potentate," said the King in his deep, calm voice, "does not seem to stand in much fear of your goddess Tarate, Sharbil." "Many kingdoms have come," replied Sharbil, "they have come and gone, but for three thousand years the goddess Tarate has outstretched her hand over her pool, and her fishes swim there as they did three thousand years ago." "So you do not intend to starve out this man in the temple?" asked the King, and a faint trace of mockery at the Romans could be heard in his indifferent voice. "Far be it from me," responded the priest with honest indignation, "to insult the goddess Tarate by doing such a thing. She is rich enough to feed those who fly to her altar."

In the East people paid little attention to time. King Mallukh let two weeks go by before he replied to the Roman Governor's letter. His epistle began with long-winded poetical tropes lauding the greatness of the Roman Empire and the greatness of the goddess Tarate. His desire to be of service to his Roman friends was ardent, but his fidelity to his sworn word was as firm as a rock, and when by the grace of heaven the crown was set on his head, he had taken an oath to respect all the gods of his country. Accordingly he had had no choice

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but to hand the Governor's letter to the High Priest of Tarate, and he now enclosed the High Priest's answer. Sharbil for his part asserted in interminable sentences that the veneration of the country of Edessa for the goddess Tarate was as deep as the ocean. And no matter how great his, Sharbil's, desire might be to help his exalted friends in the West, he could not possibly lay hands on a guest of the goddess, once he had taken refuge under her protection. Such a violation of her shrine the goddess would visit terribly by fire and flood, lightning, sword and plague, not only on Edessa but on all Syria. But he had no need to explain this to such a wise man as the Roman Viceroy.

After Cejonius had read these flowery epistles from the barbarian King and the barbarian priest, he flung them angrily on his table. If these Eastern princelets required fourteen days to produce this rigmarole, he himself took less than an hour to reply to it. He imperiously commanded the High Priest Sharbil, Master of the Temple of Tarate, to come to Antioch at once and settle the dispute.

"These Romans," observed the High Priest Sharbil to King Mallukh as they sat in the fountain room in the palace, "seem to know little about the nature of living things. Why should the fox betake himself to the cave of the lion, and be in a hurry to do it too?" After another lapse of two weeks he wrote to Antioch saying that, honoured though his unworthy self felt by the invitation of his Western master, he was unfortunately unable at the moment to take advantage of it. This was the season when the sacred fishes of the goddess Tarate spawned. It was impossible for the High Priest to forsake the precinct of the goddess during such an important process without rousing her anger and bringing down misfortune upon the land.

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Until now Cejonius had laughed at the cheap game which that petty Roman swindler, that manumitted potter, was playing. But now he grew angry at the ironical and obstinate resistance of these beggarly princes of Edessa. "Energetic measures are needed," he told himself when he read Sharbil's refusal. "I shall send troops to Edessa, six thousand men, eight thousand. Then perhaps we'll see what this goddess Tarate has to say, and her fishes and the whole pack of them."

Nevertheless, during his stay in the East he had learned enough to let this impulse die as quickly as it had arisen. He could not risk the possibility of being forced to occupy Mesopotamia and wage a war with Artaban simply to get hold of that ridiculous fellow Terence. Against the eel-like smoothness and cunning shifts of these Eastern rascals one could advance only by devious diplomatic means. It dawned upon him that the pretensions of Terence might be more than a mere private swindle, powerful men might be supporting him, among them a certain man honoured by the Parthian King. Perhaps Varro had not been far wrong with his advice to recognise Artaban. He felt sorry now that he had been somewhat short with Varro during that last interview. Hard as the man's behaviour was to bear, he would have liked to have his opinion now. He was elated when the Senator at last appeared again at the Government palace; for Varro had not shown his face there now for a long time. Obviously hurt because Pakor had been recognised against his advice.

"This is a fine kettle of fish you are cooking for me in Edessa," the Governor began in a light, man-of-the-world tone. "You know all about it, I suppose, my Varro?" "Yes," replied Varro, "my steward Lenaeus has sent me a long report." "That's your Orient for you," grumbled Cejonius with assumed humorous resignation.

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"I warned you at the start," Varro answered in a friendly voice, but somewhat gravely. "You should have ranked yourself on Artaban's side." "Do you actually think," the Governor asked, and now he no longer pretended to be amused but sat up stiffly and tensely, "that there is any connection between the pretender Artaban and this swindler?" "It's surely obvious," said Varro, shrugging his shoulders, "that the people in Edessa haven't been exactly pleased with Rome after the heavy blow you dealt them by recognising Pakor. Without the countenance of the authorities of Edessa this business of the false Nero could never have gone so far as it has." "What possible interest," asked Cejonius, "can the authorities of Edessa have in this petty rascal?" "The authorities of Edessa," Varro indulgently explained to him, "have just as much and as little interest in the pretender Terence as you have in the pretender Pakor. They want to put you in a disagreeable position. They seem to have succeeded."

Cejonius had intended to listen calmly to him, to ask his advice as one Roman of another, and this time to consider it without passion and if possible follow it. But he could not keep a growing irritation from rising in him as he saw the other man sitting there so easily and superciliously with his legs crossed, uttering things which were just as true as they were annoying. "Of course I should have taken Artaban's side," thought Cejonius. "In this accursed East a man has always to do the crookedest thing, the most roundabout thing. A straight, honest man like myself can't get anything done here. Wherever you turn it's like a tangled thicket, and when you have cut a path for yourself with your good Roman sword, you find a new jungle in front of you, and the trees have grown together again behind you. It's clear that in a place like this a man like Varro

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is bound to get on much better ; the rogue, the old ne'er-do-well. And he has had time to get acclimatised too."

"Moreover," he heard Varro saying, "it wouldn't have been easy for King Mallukh and the High Priest Sharbil to proceed against this man in the temple of Tarate, even if they had wished to do so. The whole population beyond the Euphrates is convinced that the man is the Emperor Nero."

"That is what my reports say too," Cejoinus admitted discontentedly. "But I simply can't understand it. I know these Orientals are superstitious. Behind their outward slyness and cunning they're unutterably stupid and will believe the most outrageous lies. They feed their minds on fables and fairy-tales. No wonder that a people like that are so easily held in check by an intelligent minority like us Romans, in spite of their numbers. But," he added indignantly, "they surely can't swallow such stuff as this tale about the return of Nero. Most of the people in Edessa can read and write. Do you actually think they'll let themselves be taken in by such a clumsy fraud?"

Varro reflectively nodded his huge head. "This Terence," he said—"incidentally he is a protégé of mine—has hatched this plot of his really cleverly. The story that it was Terence who was murdered and not the Emperor—every man knows how closely he resembled the Emperor—and that the man who appeared later as Terence was really Nero: all that sounds quite plausible. Here in the East, I mean, five thousand kilometers from Rome."

But Cejonius was still indignant. "Are these people quite crazy? What possible reason, in the name of Hercules, could this potter Terence have had to give himself out as the Emperor and let himself be murdered by the soldiers sent by the Senate?"

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"Here in the East," Varro affably explained, "the news has not got about yet that Roman loyalty no longer exists. You have just observed yourself, my Cejonius, that we are dealing with barbarians. Now these barbarians still quite seriously believe that in given circumstances a Roman might die for his Emperor."

Cejonius controlled his anger and withstood the temptation to jump. "These epigrams of yours are all very well, my Varro," he said, and even managed to smile. "But tell me in plain Latin: has this swindler any hopes? Can I count on the whole business collapsing by itself? Or should I intervene?"

Varro gravely regarded the Governor and passed his tongue slowly over his lips. "Has my Terence any hopes?" he repeated thoughtfully. "Look here, my dear Cejonius," he said, turning to the other, "things aren't going too well with the people in Edessa. They have to pay high taxes, they could only gain by a change of government. If a man were to appear and announce that he would abolish their taxes, he'd find a credulous hearing everywhere beyond the Euphrates. And if he had clever people behind him to support him, he could maintain his power for a considerable time."

"Then you think," asked Cejonius tensely, "that Artaban is behind this swindler?" Varro raised his shoulders and expressively let them fall again. "I simply don't know," he replied, looking the other full in the face. Now for the first time a faint divination dawned on Cejonius that there might be some sort of connection between that fellow Terence and Varro, which might explain certain dark and mysterious hints dropped by his advisers. But he immediately rejected the idea. For he knew, he had himself seen, that Varro was the whole time in Antioch, sunk in the wild pleasures of Daphne. It was impossible to direct such a complicated

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enterprise from here. And after all Varro was a Roman. What mad ideas he was beginning to get already in this mad East. No, he must not let himself be carried away by his antipathy to Varro.

"Don't underestimate this business, my Cejonius," Varro now gently counselled him. "Don't minimise the power of rumour and legend. By its very nature legend is more popular than truth. With the use of a little propaganda any legend can be put across. Not to speak of such a touching legend as that of the self-sacrificing fidelity of the potter Terence to his Emperor. Cast your mind back, my Cejonius," he added gravely. "I warned you at the start. I repeat my warning. You don't know the East. It will give you many a surprise yet."

Cejonius could no longer remain quietly in his chair. He started up and began to walk about. This affair of the false Nero exasperated him more and more. Varro was a Roman. When important Roman interests were at stake he would not fail. "You, my Varro," he began, "were a close friend of Nero and must naturally know the potter Terence very well too, since he is your protégé. You are the very man to clear up this unpleasant business. Now if you were to go to Edessa, examine the fellow, and declare to all the world who he really is, then, by Hercules, there would be an end of this fraud." Varro rejoiced in his heart. Now Jumping Jack was where he wanted him, now he could beg and pray as much as he pleased. He considered the matter aloud: "It isn't as simple as all that. The more self-evident a fact is, the more subtle and circuitous one must be in the East if one wants people to believe it." Cejonius asked a little impatiently: "Then will you please be subtle and circuitous? I give you full powers." "That is very kind of you," replied Varro. "But you see the whole thing more simply than it actually is. Please don't think me disobliging, my

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lesson. In his heart he hoped that Cejonius would give him a pretext to retire. He was honestly resolved, if Cejonius returned the six thousand, to liquidate the whole business and cast Terence back again into the nothingness out of which he had raised him.

When Varro made this proposal the Governor suddenly stopped in his march through the room. Softly and bitterly he muttered through his teeth: "You're a blackmailer." "You use hard words, my Cejonius," Varro retorted, still in a friendly voice. "Do you think I would have sent you the six thousand that day in Edessa if you had not, let us say, put some pressure upon me? Now it is I who am putting on the pressure, my Cejonius."

What Varro said made the quarrel look like a mere personal squabble between the two of them. And yet while Varro was speaking the Governor grew aware that quite other powers were involved than himself and his old school-mate. It dawned upon him that the policy of the dead Nero was the continuation of an age-old process which could not be put an end to by the will of a Governor, or even of an Emperor or an army. He divined that everything was inextricably bound together, impenetrably and beyond the mind's understanding, that the recognition of Pakor, the extortion of the six thousand sesterces, the appearance of this fellow Nero, and probably many other things of which he knew nothing, all these apparently disconnected things were profoundly and indissolubly woven together, and he and Varro, though apparently free to decide what they liked, were themselves struggling in a net, flung to and fro in it by powers unknown to them.

All at once he looked strangely helpless, like an official who finds himself unexpectedly confronted with an insoluble problem for which there is no precedent.

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What could he do, he who had learned only to act according to rule of thumb or according to his instructions? "I can't take back measures I have already carried out," he said with a shrug, "measures which I have myself decided upon in my official capacity. That would injure the prestige of the Empire". And as soon as he found the phrase: "the prestige of the Empire", he felt better. That was something to hold on to.

"The prestige of the Empire," Varro repeated reflectively. "Don't you think that the prestige of the Empire might possibly be still more gravely damaged by this business of the false Nero than by the return of the six thousand? Here in the East it is difficult to foresee to whose prestige any measure is likely to contribute in the end." Unfortunately there Varro was quite right. So Cejonius silently ignored what he had said and merely asked: "So you won't help me?" "Certainly," retorted Varro, "if you will help me." He did not mean it maliciously; he felt no elation at having forced Jumping Jack to display his helplessness. All the dangers of his adventure rose more and more menacingly before him, and behind little Cejonius he saw magnified to gigantic proportions the accumulated power of the Roman Empire. He made a last attempt and addressed the glum Governor in a tone of good-natured advice: "Think it over again, my Cejonius. Don't say no yet. Please reflect upon it."

For the fraction of a second Cejonius asked himself if it would not really be wiser to agree to Varro's proposal. He foresaw that without this man's help the false Nero might yet cause him many worries and anxieties. But at the same moment he saw himself before the veiled bust of his great-grandfather, who had brought shame upon his line. Any other man could have afforded to agree: he, Cejonius, could not. That it should be so filled him with intense bitterness; yet he was not enraged

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so much at himself as at Varro. His glum resignation faded. To replace it there rose in him a boundless rage against the man comfortably sitting there, who actually seemed to enjoy this rotten, abominable, Oriental muddle. He drew himself erect and became the Roman again, the Viceroy of the Emperor. "Of course I can't force you," he replied in his driest, rustiest official tone. And then he suddenly shouted in a breaking voice: "I represent the Emperor here. I don't bargain with his subjects."

Varro enjoyed the other man's wrath just as little as he had enjoyed his helplessness. He said to end the matter, and there was more resignation in his voice than irony: "You were right, unfortunately, my Cejonius, in what you said when we met here the first time. We really can't work together." Then he went.

Towards the evening of the same day Cejonius realised what a grave mistake he had made. He recalled Varro's words, his face, his bearing, his tone, and suddenly he saw, so clearly that his eyes were dazzled, that it was Varro and no other, Varro, his arch enemy, who stood behind the false Nero. Once more he had bungled the whole business; he should either have fulfilled Varro's conditions or else laid him by the heels.

He gave immediate orders for Varro's arrest. But Varro was already on his way to Edessa.

CHAPTER XVIII

VARRO'S GAME PRODUCES RESULTS

HE took his daughter with him. The pale, austere Marcia loved her father, yet she returned to Edessa unwillingly. In Antioch there were still traces of Rome, but Edessa was merely part of the East. Yet since her father commanded, she obeyed.

Varro travelled with a big baggage train. During the last few days he had sold as much of his property in Roman Syria as he could and also sent some of it across the frontier. Now he was taking the rest with him. He himself with Marcia and a small escort went on ahead in great haste. Presently he reached Apamea, the last Roman station, rode over the bridge crossing the Euphrates, then up to the top of a little rising whose summit marked the frontier, and halted there on non-Roman soil.

Up there Varro waited for his baggage. From the back of his horse he watched the baggage train crossing the bridge; underneath rolled the yellow river, the long procession slowly crossed, men, cattle and loaded wagons.

That little rising, Varro told himself, was one of the summits of his life. He had left much behind him on Roman soil, villas, country estates, slaves, horses, goods,

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money. It probably came to fifteen million sesterces in all, two and a half thousand times as much as the amount of the Inspection Tax. And that was not all he had left on the other side of the river. He had left there the whole Western world, Rome, Roman civilisation and Greek culture. But Varro did not regret that. His offer to Cejonius, that repeated urgent offer, was the last concession he was prepared to make to reason. The fact that Cejonius had refused to yield was a sign. Now that he had crossed the bridge, he would fling all his heart into the gamble.

On the little rising outside Apamea he waited, then, and gazed down while his people and his goods left Roman territory. The casket with the papers was brought to him. He made the bearer stop and took out the receipt. On the back of it, under the heading "Losses", he wrote down: "Fifteen million sesterces. A civilisation." Then he quickly made his way to Edessa, filled with hope and eager for action. Wherever he passed the people ran out and cheered him wildly. The news that there was a man in the temple of Tarate who was believed to be the Emperor Nero had roused wild hopes of great things to come. When he rode into Edessa he was greeted like a long-lost prince. The people stood in the streets in dense rows, Syrians, Persians, Arabs, Jews, Greeks, and they cheered him as if he were himself the Emperor Nero come to visit his beloved city of Edessa.

Varro knew the fickleness of the East and did not attach much importance to the warmth of his reception. He foresaw that a long and difficult road lay before him. First of all he must win over King Mallukh and Sharbil. He knew them both; they were sly and stubborn and would certainly make him pay dearly for their assistance. He was convinced that the King and the High Priest longed for a consultation just as eagerly as he did. Never-

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theless King Mallukh let three days go by before he summoned him to the palace.

There one of those tranquil, endless conversations took place which the King loved, a conversation exacerbating to the nerves of a Western man. The fountain plashed monotonously, and the watchman had already twice raised the curtain to announce the hour before the conversation touched upon the subject which was in all their hearts. But at last Varro ventured to begin: "The last time that I was deemed worthy to appear before the King of Edessa we spoke of a man who laid claim to a great title. That day you, Sharbil, said: 'If Rome should decide for Pakor and against Artaban, then Edessa would hear with considerable satisfaction that the Emperor Nero was still alive.' Rome has now decided for Pakor." As both men remained silent he went on: "In Antioch there is a feeling that you two have already gone pretty far." This was a hint that they had already committed themselves.

King Mallukh turned his large eloquent eyes upon Varro. "In that case," he replied, "they have not read our letters very carefully in Antioch. It's a good day's journey from Edessa to Antioch for a fast messenger on the best roads. The real state of things may very well change, therefore, while a man is on his way from Antioch to Edessa." And Sharbil underlined the King's words: "It was far from our intention to involve ourselves and we have taken good care not to do so. Anyone who knows the East must realise that the High Priest of the goddess Tarate could not leave her pool while the sacred fishes were spawning." And in dignified rebuke he went on: "The goddess Tarate makes no distinction between those who take refuge in her temple. She extends her hand over him in protection, whether he be the potter Terence or the Emperor Nero. We have not asked who

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this man is. We do not know who he is. Only you, oh Varro, you who were a close friend of the Emperor Nero, can inform us."

"Is it your serious desire," Varro enquired tentatively, "to know who this man is?" "It is our desire," retorted Sharbil, "to know what you, oh Varro, think of the man." Varro replied: "If you wish I can apply a test. There were certain secrets between the Emperor Nero and me which nobody can know of except myself and the Emperor. If this man knows of them, then he must be the Emperor. Would you accept that proof as conclusive?"

The High Priest glanced at the King and left the answer to him. "Such a test would prove much," said the King, "but it would not constitute conclusive proof. Only action can do that."

Varro saw at once what the two of them would be at. It was not the supposed Nero but himself that they wished to commit irrevocably by something more than words. But he assumed a look of simple bewilderment, as if he did not understand, and waited for further enlightenment. The impatient Sharbil immediately provided it: "It amounts to this, that you, oh Varro, must demonstrate your belief in the man by more than mere words."

Varro was prepared for the possibility that they might make great demands upon him; nevertheless he was filled with alarm now that the demand was about to be made, and he did his best to postpone the moment. "Varro knows," he retorted touchily, "that a man of the East asks much of a Western man before he will trust him. Nevertheless Varro imagines he has proved that he has already earned the right to be known as the dear cousin of the King of Edessa."

Neither Mallukh nor Sharbil replied. An endless silence set in, and Varro now regretted that he had

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condemned himself to this long wait. For these Eastern people could wait more stubbornly and calmly than he, and silence was harder for him than for them. "If I acknowledge this man to be the Emperor Nero," he said at last in an exhausted voice, "then Titus and Cejonius will confiscate all my property on Roman territory. Is not that sufficient proof for you?" Sharbil retorted with faint irony: "They may confiscate your property. But you are not greatly loved in Antioch, and they might find some pretext to get hold of it quite apart from this question of Nero. To convince us, you must give a stronger proof of your good faith." And now the King himself spoke at last. In his deep quiet voice he said: "Yes, you must give some stronger proof."

Varro turned pale; he had guessed the whole time what they were after; hence his garrulous procrastination. "Then how can I give a stronger proof?" he asked helplessly.

The watchman pulled back the curtain and announced the hour. The King ordered confections to be brought and politely enquired into Varro's stay in Antioch and his journey to Edessa. The fountain plashed monotonously.

At last Sharbil said: "You could prove it, for instance, by giving your daughter Marcia to this Nero in marriage."

When the High Priest uttered these words Varro felt as though he had been pierced to the heart. The plot they had hatched was a master-stroke of Oriental cunning and also showed how well they knew him. They had struck him in the spot where he was most vulnerable. He was devoted with his whole heart to his pale, beautiful, austere daughter. All that was Roman in him was embodied in her. There might be moments when she despised him, but even then she still loved and admired

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him. She proudly stood on her Roman dignity and avoided all communication with the rabble of the East. So that what these two men demanded of him was in very truth a proof. For by it the King and the High Priest not only bound him far more securely to them than by the mere pledging of his wealth, but they also humbled his proud Marcia by forcing her to sleep with a swindler and a slave.

If he put it to her, would Marcia consent? And if she did, would she not tear from her heart the love that she still felt for him?

He realised that his game was beginning to be a very expensive one.

He considered once more the possibility of giving up the whole business. How if he were to return to Antioch and say to Cejonius: "I've had a look at the fellow. He is beyond doubt the fool and swindler that we always took him to be, and if you wish it, my Cejonius, I shall declare it publicly." Cejonius would welcome him with open arms, and the Emperor Titus would be grateful to him. Jumping Jack would realise his worth and think twice before he demanded an Inspection Tax from him again.

But was this really a matter between Jumping Jack and himself? No, Nero's idea was at stake and the continuation of the work begun by Alexander the Great; the East was at stake and its union with Greece and Rome. Was he to lay down the task he had scarcely begun?

He bowed deeply to King Mallukh and the High Priest and said: "If the Emperor Nero should deign to ask Varro's daughter in marriage, nobody would be more overjoyed than Varro."

CHAPTER XIX

ROMANTIC DREAMS VERSUS PENSION

THE next man Varro would have to sound about Nero's ape was Fronto, the commandant of the Roman garrison. If his plan were not to fail he must assure himself of Fronto's neutrality; he did not doubt the man's secret goodwill to him. He liked Fronto. He considered him by far the most capable officer and the best politician in Mesopotamia, and felt closely drawn to him both by their common upbringing and their general views. So he set himself to arrange a casual meeting.

Now on two days every week the gentlemen of Edessa were accustomed to meet at the villa of the carpet manufacturer Nittai to play at ball, which was the rage at the time. Varro knew that Fronto often played there. He was delighted when he found him there at the second attempt. Varro was by no means a bad player and Fronto a very good one. In the dressing-room—they played in short tunics—he asked Fronto to have a game of singles. Fronto consented with visible pleasure. "The pneumatic ball or the stuffed one?" he asked. "The heavier one," Varro suggested. "As you like," Fronto smiled back.

They decided to play the usual eleven sets. After each set they took a fairly long rest, during which the Cappadocian slave rubbed them down; whereupon they tossed to decide which was to serve in the next set.

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During the first interval Varro began confidentially: "This fellow in the temple of Tarate is giving us both a hard nut to crack, my Fronto." They were sitting on a stone seat in the sun, the Cappadocian slave, who knew no Latin, was rubbing them down and massaging them, the heavy ball lay at their feet. "Not me," Fronto retorted good humouredly, pushing about the ball with his feet. "The man in the temple is not a nut for my cracking. I receive my instructions from Antioch and have no need to trouble my head about him. That is the advantage of being a soldier." Varro replied in the same tone: "It's an advantage that sometimes has to be dearly paid for. Consider the case, for instance, if our worthy King Mallukh were to decide for this man and take him out of the sanctuary. Then, you would naturally have to try to seize him. I hardly think our friend Mallukh would look on calmly in that eventuality." "Do you really think so?" Fronto retorted, with his eyes half closed, still mechanically pushing the ball about with his feet. "Don't you imagine an energetic word from Rome might be enough to bring our friend Mallukh to reason?" "I think," replied Varro, "that if our friend Mallukh, who is a peaceable man, really decided to recognise this fellow in the temple he would be pretty certain beforehand what powers were behind him. There may be certain powers behind him, you know." "Parthian?" asked Fronto. Varro shrugged his shoulders. "Powers," he contented himself with replying.

They played the second set. In the next interval Fronto said: "I can't conceive how a man in his five senses can possibly support this potter, even if there are powers behind him. Really, can any intelligent man hold there is the slightest hope of maintaining this potter Terence in the long run against the Roman Empire? Wouldn't any attempt to do so be simple madness, no

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matter who undertook it?" He glanced at Varro in solicitous anxiety. They were sitting side by side in the sun with the ball at their feet, pleasantly relaxed after the strain of playing, breathing deeply under the kneading hands of the Cappadocian. The fine circular playing court lay full in the sun. They could hear the dull thud of balls coming from the other courts and the faint calls of the players as they served.

"Where does prudence end," Varro said thoughtfully, "and where does cowardice begin? Where does daring end and where does madness begin? That is a theme well worth the serious thought of two men like you and myself. Sometimes, my Fronto, you have given me the privilege of entering into your mind. So I know that you count upon a comfortable old age at your writing-table with a good big slice of land and a good pension; but I know that you love the fascination of the incalculable too, the changeful, the adventurous, or whatever you like to call it. So you can appreciate that Mallukh or the powers behind the potter Terence might conceivably let themselves be carried away, against all reason, by the fascination of the unknown, and recognise the Emperor Nero in this fellow in the temple. Will you let me try, my Fronto, to think for you, and as Fronto weigh up what, let us say, the commandant of the Roman garrison might find it wise to do in such a case?" "I am listening," replied Fronto smilingly, his foot in its light yellow sandal was still playing with the ball.

Varro went on: "First of all, you could act the gallant soldier, refuse to listen to the voice of prudence and simply try to seize Terence. What would happen in that case? King Mallukh could not possibly countenance such a thing, once he had declared for Nero. With all your military gifts you could do very little with your five hundred men against his ten thousand. You could die

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heroically and melodramatically and become a hero in the school books. Jumping Jack, for his part, couldn't simply sit still after the Edessa garrison had been butchered ; he would be forced to take energetic measures. The Parthian King Artaban, again, couldn't look on quietly while Roman troops poured over the Euphrates ; on the pretext of a war of defence he would probably side-track his rival Pakor and unite the whole Parthian people. The result would be this : that we would have war again with the Parthians." "That may be," Fronto admitted. "But aren't these considerations which should be reviewed by the minister in Rome or the ruling Governor in Antioch ? I, my Varro, am a soldier. Nothing would remain for me in the case you outline but to die bravely, as you say. But now let us get on with our game." He rattled the dice and shook them out. "You serve, my Varro," he said.

"You took it out of me that time," he said appreciatively after the seventh set. Varro smiled gratefully. Fronto had won five sets, he only two. "Will you allow me now," he said, after he had got back his breath, "to put myself in the place of King Mallukh ? Edessa has at least as much interest as Rome in avoiding an open conflict. So King Mallukh will do all he can to enable the commandant of the Roman garrison to act with the most strict correctness and yet not intervene." "Harder, harder !" Fronto encouraged the Cappadocian, who was rubbing his back. "You are talking purely hypothetically, of course," he said, turning to Varro. "Of course," the other hastened to assure him. "I put myself the theoretical question, what the commandant of the Roman garrison should do if King Mallukh or someone else made a last attempt to resurrect the policy of Nero in the East. Should he sacrifice his life and ruin that attempt from the start, should he do his so-called duty, die heroically and

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involve the Empire in peril? Or should he"—and now Varro was smiling—"stick to the instructions which he has to memorise as an officer of the Flavian Emperor; should he decide that it is better to do nothing than to do something rash, and thus save the Empire from a war with Parthia?"

Fronto looked into his friend's agitated face. "You are getting very warm," he said, "about a theoretical question." "Does that surprise a theoretician like you?" answered Varro. "I find the problem thrilling. Which is the better man? The one who dies heroically and uselessly, or the one who allows himself unheroically but blamelessly to be forced into neutrality by gentle violence?"

With a light, friendly gesture Fronto put his hand on the other man's shoulder. "You really shouldn't trouble your head so much about these hypothetical questions, my Varro," he replied warmly. "But as you already know something about my feelings, as you say, let me tell you something more: it has always been my ambition to lead an interesting and adventurous life, but at the same time to stick to my fifty-one per cent of security and my pension. I have earned the right to my pension as it is. If the gods should grant me an adventurous life as well, without my having to give up my fifty-one per cent of security, then I should regard that as an undeserved windfall."

Varro did his best to conceal his joy. "That's enough," he cried to the slave, who withdrew quickly and noiselessly. Then he clasped Fronto's hand. "Thanks for your frankness, my Fronto," he said warmly. "This is a talk we have been going over in our minds for twelve years now. I am glad that our thoughts have at last found words."

Fronto softly withdrew his hand. He raised one finger and said warningly: "Don't forget, my Varro, it's all hypothetical." He flung the dice. "You serve again," he said. "But look out. I'll win this set in spite of that."

CHAPTER XX

VARRO TESTS HIS PUPPET

SINCE Sharbil's assurance that the protection of the goddess extended over the whole temple precinct, Terence had been living in the house of the High Priest. Two fine rooms were put at his disposal, rooms too good for the potter Terence, but much too bad for the Emperor Nero. There now lived the man on whom, little by little, the eyes of all Mesopotamia were being turned. He set himself as ever to appear at once indifferent and full of mysterious importance. That was not easy ; for he felt that he was always being watched, though for most of the time he was left alone.

Sometimes Knops came and reported to him what was happening outside the temple precinct. Knops was very clever. He never implied even by a look that he was rendering the other man a service ; he brought out his news in a casual tone as if he assumed his master already knew it.

Through Knops Terence learned of Varro's arrival. He expected the Senator to seek him out at once. But this time, too, Varro seemed to think it best to make the fellow humble by keeping him guessing, so that he might not acquire too high an opinion of himself and escape from his master's control. He had not forgotten the embarrassment into which he had been thrown by

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the sudden and astonishing transformation of Terence into Nero; also the prudence and intelligence which Terence had shown in these long weeks of waiting warned him to be careful. So Varro kept him dangling and by doing so actually managed to make him uncertain of himself.

Yet when Varro at last arrived he found Terence apparently as calm and indifferent as ever. The Senator did not behave like a patron to a dependent, but neither did he treat Terence as if he were the Emperor. He felt ill at ease, for in Sharbil's house the walls might have ears, and he had to be careful not to utter a single imprudent word.

"The goddess Tarate," he began, gazing round the room, "seems to look after her guests not too badly. In our Golden House there is more actual comfort; yet one could live very nicely here even if one were used to all sorts of luxuries." "No better means," Terence responded with a quotation from a Greek tragedian, "have the gods given man to show his worth than patience." Varro smiled appreciatively at the smoothness of the fellow and his skill in giving equivocal answers. "Patience?" he retorted. "There are many people who already believe you are not the potter Terence but another, as was once hinted in my house." Terence looked him full in the face. "Perhaps I have become another," he replied calmly, yet with emphasis. Varro enquired: "So formerly you were the potter Terence?" "For a time," retorted the man, "it pleased me to be the potter Terence." Varro remarked with faint irony: "You managed to get used to him fairly well." "There have been princes," replied Terence, "who were pleased to be taken for actors. And is it not more important that others should believe you are a certain personage than that you should be that personage? What do you say to that, my Varro?" And for the first time he called

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him by his name, ignoring his title. But Varro told himself: "This familiarity will not last, my Terence."

Aloud he said: "Many people now believe that the Emperor Nero is still alive and is here in Edessa. Some deny it, on the other hand. Others jeer at the idea. For instance, there is John of Patmos, the actor, an expert in such matters, as you must admit. He says that if he had played Nero in the tragedy of *Octavia* as badly as a certain person has been playing Nero in Edessa, everybody would have laughed at him." As Varro said this, the potter Terence could not keep his lips from twitching. The day would come when he would show that fellow John who was the better actor. He took refuge from Varro's sally in the mystical. "The Deity," he said, "fashions his creatures in myriads, but it pleases him to create now and then a human face which is unique, so that all must recognise it." "Are you not deceiving yourself in saying so?" replied Varro. "Is not such an assertion somewhat daring? Granting that there exists a man with the undeniable face of the Emperor Nero, may there not be means by which it can be incontestably proved that that man is not the Emperor Nero but someone else?" And when Terence became uneasy he continued: "Or are there no such means?" "There may be," the man replied hesitatingly. "The authorities of Edessa," Varro went on, "believe in any case that there are such means. If a certain person whom I shall not name claims to be the Emperor Nero, the authorities of Edessa take it that he must be acquainted with certain secrets which are known only to Nero and the Senator Varro." Terence remained silent in great embarrassment. "Doesn't that seem reasonable to you?" Varro went on ironically. "It seems reasonable to me," muttered the man. "Well then," Varro retorted jovially.

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"Why shouldn't we sit down?" he asked the other man, for they were still standing about somewhat ceremoniously. They seated themselves.

"Can you remember, for example," he confidentially began his catechism, "a day in May, it must have been in the year 818 after the foundation of the city, when the Emperor Nero visited the Peacock Brothel behind the circus Maximus? He had a number of friends with him, among others the Senator Varro." Terence's smooth, rosy cheeks flushed slightly. It was shabby of Varro to bring up that particular episode, for during that visit to the brothel Lucia, a well-known lady, had lost her life, there had been a painful scene, and the Emperor had suddenly decided that his name must not be associated with it. So it was given out that the person who had been taken for the Emperor was a chance visitor whom the others had picked up in the street and taken along with them for a joke. This man had then been recognised as the potter Terence and summoned before the Praetor and fined; his fine had later been made up to him with something to spare by some anonymous benefactor. During his trial the potter Terence had come to know certain details of this affair which could not be accessible to other people. Therefore Varro was in a sense doing Terence an obligation by identifying him as Nero through his knowledge of these details. But Terence did not see any generosity in the Senator's question, but merely irony. He seldom recalled this episode, and always with discomfort. He liked to see himself before the Senate reading out the Emperor's message, not before the Praetor accepting responsibility for actions which even the Emperor, who was by no means prudish, would not take upon him. "I can remember that business in the Peacock Brothel," he said reluctantly. "And do you remember," Varro went on, still in the same light conver-

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sational tone, "what the Emperor said while Lucia was standing naked in the window and Aelius was on the point of flinging her down?" Now Terence knew nothing about that part of it, for there had been no mention of it during the trial. Probably nobody knew about it except the few men in whose company Nero had visited the brothel, if they were still alive and if they could still remember. And Terence now felt doubly at a loss, for Varro's question was shown to be no mere convenient trick, but an honest test. However that might be, he must make some answer. He pulled himself together, assumed the bearing of Nero, filled himself with Nero's spirit, as he fancied, brought out his emerald, became Nero, and replied in the voice of Nero: "'That is enough, my Aelius. One flings field marshals and kings out of the window, but not naked ladies.' That is what Nero said, or something like that." Varro smiled. This was the first time that he had seen Terence's emerald. Nero's emerald had been somewhat smaller, but more finely cut. And the real Nero had made no attempt to be witty in the brothel that day. Indeed, while Aelius was preparing to fling Lucia out of the window he had been befuddled like most of the others, so he had yawned and said somewhat fatuously in a thick voice: "Carry on, my Aelius, do just as you like. She's my property, but you can have her." It amused and tickled Varro to reflect that Terence could not picture himself as Nero in any everyday situation, but believed that even in a brothel the Emperor must behave in an impressive manner and think of nothing lower than field marshals and kings.

Until now Terence had managed to answer the Senator with some assurance. But hardly had he finished his sentence than in spite of himself he let his assumed role fall, took the emerald from his eye, became the potter Terence again, and peered intently at Varro to

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find out whether he had guessed the right answer. But Varro merely smiled and did not let his creature know how near or how far he had been from the truth. Instead he got up and said, it was more a command than a request: "If the Emperor Nero thinks of assuming rule again, then he should do so now."

After Varro had left Terence took a deep breath. Without caring whether he was being watched he again assumed the bearing and voice of Nero, pulled out his emerald, strutted up and down in the walk of Nero and began to talk to himself, drunken with happiness.

Book II
TRIUMPH

CHAPTER XXI

ON THE NATURE OF POWER

SINCE his audience with King Mallukh it had been clear to Varro that he would not be able to advance his project until he had persuaded Marcia to marry the fellow. For days, for a whole week, he postponed the painful interview; then he screwed himself to the point and sent for her.

Marcia sat before him, pale, slender, austere. He spoke of this and that and put off the moment. At last he pulled himself together. "A man has appeared," he began, "whom all Mesopotamia takes to be the Emperor Nero. You have heard of him, of course. This man has asked for your hand."

Marcia kept her eyes fixed on his mouth. At first she could not understand. Then she understood. Her father was quite casually assuming that she would submit to this unspeakable humiliation, as if it were a matter of accepting an invitation to dinner. She was so overwhelmed with horror that her heart almost stopped. But she did not lose her senses. She held herself erect, grew very pale and clutched the arm of her chair. Varro had long since said what he had to say and still she did not speak. She kept gazing at his lips, as if something more must issue from them. Varro glanced across at her and tried to conceal his painful apprehension.

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"Is this man the Emperor Nero?" Marcia asked at last in a curiously dry voice. "You already know him by the name of the potter Terence," Varro replied with difficulty. Marcia compressed her lips until they became a thin sharp line. "If I am right," she said, "the man is one of your slaves whom you set free. Wasn't his father the slave that looked after the water-pipes and lavatories in our house in Rome?"

She thought: "Why didn't they make me a vestal, as my mother wanted? By now I should be living in dignified seclusion in the fine house in the Via Sacra. During the games at the circus I would occupy a place of honour in the Emperor's box. In the June festival I would ascend to the Capitol at the side of the Emperor, amid the silent reverence of the people. But my father would not have it. He has saved me up to be a pawn in his dark and filthy intrigues."

Varro was thinking: "Her mother could never endure me because I married her for her money and was never really in love with her. So in revenge she tried to make the girl a vestal and fill her mind with all sorts of nonsense. I should have paid more attention to her when she was a child. But I hadn't the time. A girl with such ideas must certainly find it hard to go to bed with that fellow. Her feelings are silly, but all the same they are a reality which I'll have to reckon with."

Aloud he said: "I know that you consider it shameful and un-Roman to ask such a thing of you. But one can't live in Syria as if one were in Rome. You will retort: Then one shouldn't live in Syria. But in the first place I am forced to do so against my will, and in the second I would do so even if I were free to live in Rome. I tell you, my Marcia, it's worth renouncing some of your dignity for what the East can give you in exchange. I would find it simply impossible to live anywhere but in the East.

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I am bored in the West. And to be quite frank, I have no wish to renounce the influence and power which I can exercise now only in the East."

Marcia sat on, slender and motionless. She thought with hatred: "How shamefully he has betrayed me, and yet he pretends to be honourable. He flings me to that scum, and he wraps up his actual reasons in all sorts of noble phrases." "You say I must become the wife of the potter Terence," she replied with cold and ironical matter-of-factness.

The scornful composure of his daughter wounded Varro more deeply than tears and prayers could have done. "It's true," he thought, "that the fellow is no better than a slave. But I had little pleasure out of her mother, although she was a senator's daughter. She should be glad that she's getting rid of her accursed virginity. Once she's in bed with the man, what can it matter to her whose son he is, if he only shows some enterprise."

Aloud he said: "We, Nero and I, invested a good part of Rome in Mesopotamia, soldiers, money, time, nerves, blood. I have no intention of giving all that up again, simply because these dunces on the Palatine have no eye for anything beyond the strategic frontiers of the Empire and can't see the marvellous economic and cultural opportunities on this side of the Euphrates. Having no imagination, they hold it's impossible to unite Rome with the East; yet one only needs to open one's eyes to see that the cities that have arisen here are simply wonderful. I, at any rate, refuse to give up the East. I have given all my money and my life to it, and I have the right to ask sacrifices from others as well."

All these years Marcia had hoped that her father would be rehabilitated and that they would return to Rome and there lead a life of dignity and honour. Not

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till a few days before, when Varro had had to make a hurried flight from Roman territory, had this hope been shattered. She gave up her dreams then and replaced them with a sober hope. In his reserved way Fronto had shown her that he admired her. In rank and name he was not good enough for a senator's daughter. But he looked well with his elegant bearing, his wide, intelligent brow and short iron-grey hair; also he was a Roman, with a Roman's good breeding and cultivation, and at least he was a man compared with these Oriental animals. She had decided to encourage him to propose to her. It would not be much of a life that she would lead tied to him, but it would be a decent life at least. And now her father would not grant her even that comfort, but expected her to consent to this shameful humiliation. He was prepared to fling her austerity, her purity and pride, to that rogue, that slave, the son of the lavatory attendant. She remained silent, her pale face a mask of disgust.

"Whatever the truth may be," Varro continued, shrugging his shoulders, "for me this man is the true Nero. He must be. For many reasons I can't retreat now. But he is only Nero if I believe in him. And I must give a proof that I believe in him."

"And I," replied Marcia stiffly and scornfully, "am the proof. I must pay for your intrigues."

Varro was thinking: "Some women are actually ruined for life by it. The first time that I slept with that girl—what was her name again? She was fourteen, a Thracian—she was so thrown off her balance that she never recovered again. And yet I was quite gentle with her. I paid four thousand for her, and after all she was of no use except for washing dishes. Am I cynical? Yet I love my girl. She's very sensitive and I must have patience with her. I fancy the best thing would be

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to tell her the truth. She will understand. The simplest and the safest thing is to tell her just how things stand."

He said: "People don't like a gifted man to have power. They simply won't put up with it. They'll only put up with incapable fools. They hounded Nero to death and me from power because we were gifted men. And now that I have built up some power a second time, they want to snatch it from me again. But I won't give it up. I refuse to endure that a second time. Before I would consent to it I would stake everything, myself and you and everything."

Varro's calculation had been quite right. Marcia awoke from her frozen hostility. She realized that he was speaking honestly. Her feelings for her father had always been a mixture of admiration and repulsion; now she felt again the attraction he had for her.

He sat with his legs crossed in the lax Oriental fashion, as if by this casual posture he wished to make his words sound less melodramatic. "Rome means strength," he said, "Rome means power. And what is power? The busy efficient Titus, who calls himself Emperor, imagines he possesses power because he has at his disposal a huge military and administrative organisation. I don't envy him. What does he really possess? The sergeant-major's cudgel. The fasces and the axe. Are these power?" He was no longer speaking to his daughter but to himself. One could see the ideas rising in his mind and spontaneously clothing themselves in words. He spoke quietly but with passion; the clear, hard, logical, Latin sentences fell from his lips as musically as Greek verse. "No," he went on, "power is something much more subtle. Power is an idea rising in the mind, becoming deed, and bending the crude reality to its will. The great majority of men reconcile themselves to the accomplished fact. They tell themselves that because

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things are so, things must be so. That is the great lapse, the great crime of mankind. I refuse to accept it. Why must things be as they are? You say that Nero is dead? But that fact is stupid and senseless, for it upsets the reasonable order of things. It does not fit into my conception of the world. I do not recognise it. I must oppose such a senseless actuality; I declare war upon it; I shall make Nero live again. People say that the East is one thing and Rome another, and that they can never meet, and for that reason you must either renounce the East or else renounce Rome. I refuse to renounce either. I refuse to submit to such flat-footed logic. Not to submit to the stupid, soulless actuality, not to rest content with it, but to take arms against it and fate, that is what I mean by Roman. To oppose what should be to what is and win the fight: that is the only form of power worth one's pains."

Marcia kept looking at his mouth, a faint flush had risen in her cheeks. She had forgotten that a few moments before she had thought his fine words merely a sort of trimming for his petty interests.

He fell silent, then raised his head, emerged from his absorption, and looked at her. He went over to her and lightly laid his hand on her shoulder. "Believe me, my Marcia," he said, "I know what it means to suggest to a woman like you that you should sleep with that creature." He said "creature", he employed that equivocal and contemptuous term, and Marcia saw that by doing so he left open the question whether Terence was a creature fashioned by the gods or by himself; and she felt proud to share that secret with him. "But I know too," he went on, "that you will understand why I have asked it of you."

Marcia gazed at her father; her eyes were like his, brown and cold and passionate at once. She was intel-

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ligent enough to realise that a game so perilous as this could not last long and that in all probability it would end disastrously. But already a little of her father's passion had infected her, already in her cold imagination she could see herself on the Palatine, it was no longer the slave but the Emperor with whom she was to sleep, and it cost her some regret as well as effort to turn back from these dangerous dreams to reason again.

"Rome," she objected, "rose to greatness by always recognising clearly what is." But Varro would not have it. "That is only a half truth," he said passionately. "To know what is, but not recognise it ; that is how Rome became great. Rome had some ten thousand men and the world had fifty million. That was the reality. But Rome did not recognise that reality. Rome willed that the world should become Roman, and the world became Roman."

Marcia stood up. "May I go now, Father?" she asked. Varro went up to her, took her white face in his hands, bent it backwards and his own head backwards at the same time, so that he might see her clearly. "If you wish, Marcia, you will make your entry into Rome yet," he promised her. Marcia gazed at him, and there was much knowledge and very little belief in her eyes. She rebelled with all her might against the game which her father was playing with her. But already, though she loathed that game, she saw that it was great in conception. And wasn't anything better than this vegetating in an Eastern provincial town?

Varro knew quite well what was happening within her. He still held her face in his hands. They stood like this for a little while, gazing at each other, knowing each other's thoughts, and in that moment Marcia realised with painful clearness all the feelings which had accumulated in her for her father: love, hatred, attraction, contempt and admiration.

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After this interview Varro felt exhausted as if he had done some hard manual task. He knew that things were going well. But it would cost him a hard effort still before he finally won Marcia. That week he had three more talks with her.

Then at last he informed the High Priest Sharbil that he had convinced himself by certain proof that the guest of the goddess Tarate was in truth the Emperor Nero, whom people had believed to be dead. He invited King Mallukh and the High Priest to the marriage of his daughter Marcia with the Emperor, which would take place at the next new moon.

CHAPTER XXII

ROMAN FAITH

THE first consequence of this announcement was a call from the High Priest Sharbil on Fronto. He confidentially informed the Roman commandant that there was reliable evidence to prove that the man in the temple of Tarate was really the Emperor Nero, whom people believed to be dead. Fronto replied courteously that the recognition or non-recognition of an emperor was a problem which could be dealt with only by kings and high priests, governors and senators, not by a humble officer. Thereupon Sharbil assured him that it was far from his wish to press burdensome advice upon him. Yet out of mere friendship and loyalty he wished to inform him that King Mallukh felt bound in conscience to keep the oath which he had sworn to this man who had now been proved to be the Emperor Nero by the aforementioned evidence.

Fronto glanced at Sharbil. King Mallukh, he replied slowly and gravely, was also bound by oath and treaty to the ruling Emperor Titus in Rome. After some reflection Sharbil answered that he could understand that a man who had worn the emperor's crown without question for a long time must have for many people the

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presently start on his progress to Rome to assume once more the government of the Empire.

On the day that Terence moved to the royal palace Fronto refused all leave to his officers and men. He issued strict instructions to them to avoid any collision with the population and on no account to go near the man Terence. The officers and men were kept busy going through a severe course of drill for that and the two following days.

Fronto was not very much loved, but he was respected. He was a Roman aristocrat, while his detachment, five companies belonging to the fourteenth legion, consisted mainly of rude Dalmatians; he was a gentleman, and they were common fellows. The service was hard, but they put up with it. After they had served for thirty years they would receive a piece of land and a sum of money, hardly earned land, hardly earned money, but good land and good money. The tie with which Rome bound its soldiers to it was discipline at one end and the right to pension at the other. Without keeping discipline they would never see either the land or the money. The soldiers knew that.

So Fronto's men kept good discipline. But naturally they had many discussions about the new Emperor. Tradition had always told them that their allegiance was due to the Emperor whom they could most safely trust to fulfil their just claim to be looked after in their old age. The whole army, including Fronto's men, interpreted in such terms the Roman faith which they owed to the Senate and the people of Rome. On the other hand, a change of Emperors was a great gamble. A new emperor was accustomed to purchase the allegiance of the army with a high gratuity. In the matter of looking after the soldier's old age the Flavian Emperors had, up to now, fulfilled expectations, but the gratuities they had handed

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out on coming to the throne had been niggardly. The Emperor Nero had a reputation for generosity. If King Mallukh's guest should prove a Nero in generosity, and if further he could give adequate guarantees regarding pensions, then the soldiers were quite prepared to pass his claims without examining them too closely. So they waited, and while they waited they kept discipline.

There were a few enthusiasts, however. For instance, a young officer, a certain Testimus, reported to Fronto. Standing stiffly at attention, with a shy and yet defiant air, he informed his commander that he was prepared to put an end to this scandalous adventure of the traitor Terence. He had acquired unusual skill in handling the short Syrian dagger. When the slave Terence visited the temple of Apollo in two days' time, he would strike the fellow down on the threshold, if Fronto would give his consent.

Testimus had joined the army only a few weeks before. He had few friends ; for it always took some time for the other officers and the better class people in Edessa to size up a new arrival and admit him into their circle. Fronto had taken a dislike to the young man from the start. Now it seemed that his feelings had not deceived him ; the fellow was one of those simple-minded blood-thirsty patriots who had always been a danger to the Empire and society. An attempt on Terence's life was just what would occur to one of these crude asses as the ideal solution of the problem. With Terence himself the whole subversive movement would collapse. All Varro's plans, and with them all hope of returning to a real Eastern policy. A radical solution, certainly. But it would be a great pity to sabotage in advance a return to a genuine policy in the East, and besides the deed would have to be dearly paid for afterwards. For it was extremely doubtful if the population of Edessa would

take the death of their Nero lying down. It was probable, indeed, that they would revenge his death on the Roman garrison by putting them to the sword. If that happened the further consequences were unpredictable. A punitive expedition against Edessa, the possibility of a new Parthian war, would be brought dangerously close by such an act.

The simplest thing for Fronto would, of course, have been expressly to forbid the patriot Testimus to carry out his plan. But if that came to the ears of Cejonius, wouldn't it tend to rouse suspicion against him? No, he must manage the matter more ingeniously if he were to draw Testimus's teeth and ruin his plan.

So he began by asking Testimus whether he was aware that in all probability he would lose his life by his action. Testimus was quite aware of that. Fronto then enquired if he had also considered that his death would be an anonymous one, and bring no honour to his name or his family; for in no circumstances could the Roman army accept the onus of such a murder; that might involve fatal consequences. But the inflexible Testimus had also considered that. He affirmed that it was sweet and glorious to die for one's fatherland, even anonymously.

So there was nothing left for Fronto, if he was to save civilisation from the perils of a new Parthian war, but the circuitous and unsentimental policy which he had sought to avoid by asking these questions. He drily told the patriot Testimus that he declined all responsibility; on the other hand he gave Testimus complete freedom, on the understanding, naturally, that no one must know of his intentions, and that he guaranteed that his corpse would not be recognised. Testimus replied in the usual formula of the service, "I obey", and thanked his commander for allowing him to die such a glorious death. Then he withdrew.

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On the same day Varro received an unsigned letter with the information that on the day after to-morrow an attempt would be made on the Emperor Nero's life on the threshold of the temple of Apollo.

So Testimus's skill in handling the short Syrian dagger did not avail him much. Almost before he could draw it he was torn back, struck down and trampled to death by the furious crowd. Nevertheless by some fortunate chance the Emperor Nero managed to get a slight skin wound out of the affair. The crowd tumultuously acclaimed him, and after the attempt on his life everybody in Edessa was doubly convinced that the man must be Nero ; for why else should anyone have an interest in getting rid of him ?

In the citadel every soldier naturally knew that the unknown assassin had been that ass Testimus : and they were convinced that the authorities of Edessa also knew it. They waited for King Mallukh to send troops to destroy them, or, which was still more likely, to let loose the maddened population of Edessa upon them. The soldiers were plunged in fear, rage and despair. Officers and men confidently reckoned on being butchered before relief troops could arrive from Roman Syria, and long before their pensions were due.

But King Mallukh's troops did not appear, nor was there any sign of the mob. Instead a courier in the white livery of the Imperial house appeared at the garrison. The man brought with him a letter and a large sum of money. The letter explained that this was an instalment of the gratuity which the Emperor Nero, now that he had decided to assume rule again, was granting to his troops in Edessa. His Majesty had no wish to blame the whole garrison for the deed of a madman. The soldiers breathed freely again and exulted. Fronto recognised the tactics of his friend Varro. But he continued to act

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with unimpeachable correctness. He declared that he could not distribute the money; he must wait for instructions from Antioch.

After the terrors they had passed through, the troops were doubly moved by the generosity of the new Emperor. Who was the Emperor to whom their real allegiance was due, the strict, stingy Titus in Rome, or the mild and generous Nero in Edessa? To ask the question was to answer it.

Next day one of Nero's officers appeared before the citadel. After some slight hesitation the guards admitted him. The officer made a speech and distributed money. Fronto rushed up in great agitation. He ordered the guards who had let the man in to be seized. The soldiers hesitated. Fronto himself laid hold of them. The new officer commanded the troops to follow him in the name of the Emperor and shouted, "Fall into line. Quick march." The majority of the soldiers formed into line and obeyed. Fronto planted himself in the gateway with drawn sword. They gently pushed him aside. Those who were nearest claimed to have heard him saying in a paternal warning voice, "Lads, lads", while they were leaving the citadel.

Fronto sent a report of the incident to Antioch, as he did on everything that happened. He worked long and lovingly on his reports until they became supple, terse, lucid, faintly ironical, immaculately correct. Adducing the most sound reasons, he explained why he had acted as he had done. He considered objectively whether after the revolt of his soldiers he should have fallen on his sword, instead of remaining alive for the sake of the fatherland. He described without pathos his temptation to die heroically, and the struggle it had cost him to do nothing rather than something rash, according to the famous instructions of the Flavians.

CHAPTER XXIII

FRONTO'S DOUBTS AND HOPES

THE events leading to the peaceful but compulsory capitulation of the Roman troops had followed each other rapidly. They were past before Fronto had the key to them: that is, the news of Marcia's betrothal to the potter Terence. Then he saw the whole chain of cause and effect from beginning to end. He saw that Mallukh and Sharbil had refused to adopt Nero's cause until they had first bound Varro to them by that firm bond.

It must have cost the Senator a hard struggle to submit to such a humiliation, and Marcia a hard struggle to obey. Fronto grew thoughtful. The fact that Varro had staked not only his position and wealth but his daughter and himself in this gamble showed how deeply he believed in his chances. Might this Nero possibly pull it off after all? Fronto recalled what Varro had said to him a short time ago in the playing court of Nittai's villa. Against all his common sense and all his reading of experience, the long-buried hope once more awoke in him that the advent of this Nero might yet give him his chance to translate his military conceptions into practice.

If his first thoughts were absorbed by the consequences which Marcia's marriage might have for his

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life work and his career, his second thoughts were taken up by Marcia herself.

Fronto loved to analyse things. He was extremely aware of himself as a person, and he was a cool reckoner. His first and prime aim was to finish his *Manual of Military Art* in tranquil seclusion when his years of service were over and a secure old age lay before him. His second desire was to try out the theories of his manual in practice. His merely private feelings occupied only the third place in his heart.

Now among these feelings, which included the enjoyments of the bed and the table, the change and excitements of travel, the pleasures of art and literature, his attraction for Marcia occupied the chief place. He had been spoiled by women all his life, and he was particularly liked by the women of the East. But he did not invest much real passion in his relations with these women. He accepted their favours with gratitude, but without giving himself in return. With Marcia it was different. If he had not been averse to inflated phrases, he might have told himself that he loved her. Instead he assured himself that what attracted him in Marcia was doubtless merely the contrast she formed to the Eastern women about her. For several hundred miles she was the only Roman lady he could talk to, but if he were to see her in Rome, say, or in other Roman surroundings, her fascination would soon fade. But these rational excuses did not help him much. Her presence agitated him. His mind was just as occupied by thinking out delicate little personal attentions to her as by strategical problems. He knew Marcia and was resolved not to rush things ; he was patient by nature and had practised patience in the East. He felt certain that she, a true Roman, was bound to become his sometime, since her father's fate forced her to live among Orientals. But how that was to be brought about he could not see

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at all clearly. He was extremely averse to the thought of marriage ; the idea of being tied to another human being made him acutely uncomfortable. Nevertheless, if no other means could be found of getting hold of Marcia, he was prepared in the last resort even to marry her.

The fact that Marcia would now be Terence's bed-fellow changed the situation. In his favour or his disfavour ? He admitted that Marcia's austerity, her vestal-like purity, was one of the things that attracted him to her, and the thought that another would enjoy her virginity was painful to him. Yet was not that more than outweighed by the fact that now there was no need to marry her ? And would not his chances with Marcia be actually increased by her marriage to this swindler Nero ? Fronto was proud, and he knew that Marcia too was proud. He was an aristocrat, and this fellow Terence was a man of the people at best, and even if the improbable happened and Marcia were actually to accept the dolt for a few days or nights as the Emperor, he had little doubt that in the long run a Fronto must prevail over a Terence.

Meanwhile his position in Edessa was becoming more and more invidious. More of his men had gone over to Nero, and he now lived in the huge citadel with some twenty men. As the commander of these twenty men he represented somewhat absurdly the Roman Empire of the Flavians in rebellious Mesopotamia. He followed the same routine as before, appeared at court, went for walks, rode and hunted in the neighbourhood. Like the authorities of Edessa he kept up the fiction that universal peace reigned and that the most friendly relations existed between Rome and Edessa. But the situation was highly uncomfortable ; he felt painfully isolated, and longed for an opportunity to talk the matter over with someone.

He was delighted when he met Varro a second time by chance in the playing court of the villa.

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"Don't you find the happenings here interesting, my Fronto?" began Varro. "Interesting, possibly," Fronto admitted. "To represent the power of the Flavians in Edessa is still an honourable task, I suppose, but it isn't exactly enjoyable. My twenty men who, being the last, are very Roman and heroic, keep begging me to fight my way through with them to the Roman frontier."

Varro was sitting on a bench: with the tip of his yellow sandal he drew a line on the ground before him. "I feel to blame for this, my Fronto," he said. "If you insist on a retreat, then you can have it, and a brilliant and heroic retreat at that. We shall put up almost insuperable difficulties. Before you reach the frontier three or four of your twenty men will be killed, in fact as many as you like, and you will get a slight wound yourself. Your heroic march through a hostile province will be compared by everyone with the retreat of the Ten Thousand. You will make your entry into Antioch as a second Xenophon, you will be gloriously fêted, and you will be able to write afterwards the most fascinating and moving account of it."

"I don't doubt," replied Fronto, "that you would be able to arrange all that excellently. I don't doubt either that I should reach Antioch with my right to pension intact. But why should I be here still, if I were thinking of nothing but my fifty-one per cent security?"

"Does that mean that you actually want to remain here?" asked Varro, and he was quite unable to conceal his joy. As Fronto was silent he added a little ironically, yet with genuine anxiety: "If you are wanting adventure we can provide you with that here. Yet I must warn you, glad as I should be to have you here. It's very difficult to prophesy what will happen. However things turn out, many people will be killed and many things swept away. I can't guarantee that your right to your pension

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won't be swept away along with them. I'm afraid that if you stay here much longer Jumping Jack will begin to cock his ears and then you can whistle for your fifty-one per cent."

Fronto's heart warmed to hear Varro speaking so honestly and frankly. "You mustn't underestimate my literary ability," he retorted complacently. "I am considered a good stylist, and my behaviour here needs nothing to justify it but a well-turned phrase. Until now Jumping Jack has read out of my reports exactly what I wanted him to read out of them, and he hasn't refused to listen to my arguments either. I have got him to go a good long way: he has actually commanded me not to fall on my sword like his ancestor, but to conquer my feelings and stay on here at this tragi-comic post."

Varro seized Fronto's hand and pressed it. "It cost me a good deal," he said, and in his voice was that charming solicitude which had fascinated so many other men, "to advise you to withdraw. The fact that you have decided to stay is worth more to me than a victory. I'm glad to have you as my friend. My chances of coming through here aren't great. But if the improbable should happen, and now and then it does happen, I hope to prove yet that I am not a bad friend."

That evening Varro took out the receipt for the six thousand sesterces and on the back entered under the heading "Gains": "A friend".

CHAPTER XXIV

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VARRO could not bring himself to inform his creature, who since his talk with Marcia had become hateful to him, of the benefit he had been forced to heap upon him. So that while other people already knew of the planned marriage, Varro left Terence to learn it by chance.

It was the slave Knops who first informed him of his prospective elevation.

This happened in the following way. For the time being Terence was living in King Mallukh's palace, but incognito; for Mallukh had no intention of recognising him publicly until the marriage with Varro's daughter was an accomplished fact, and Terence wisely guarded against displaying any eagerness to be recognised. Hitherto Knops had smilingly accepted the double disguise his master had assumed. As that seemed to be Terence's wish, he did not treat him as Nero, but rather as the potter of former days who, though he was Nero in reality, was pleased to hide himself behind the mask of Terence. Now it seemed to Knops that the time had come to ignore the second of these two masks. "I am in a great quandary," he said in his half-obsequious, half-brazen way, "as to how I should address you, master. The people of Edessa maintain that the potter Terence,

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Knops's master, no longer exists. Instead, they hold that all this time the great Emperor Nero has been pleased to assume the cloak of Terence, just as Zeus on occasion changed himself into a bull. Between ourselves I, your devoted Knops, realised long ago that you must be the Emperor, if only from your lack of expert knowledge about pottery. But nobody can tell me how long Your Majesty intends to play the potter, and only now that I hear you have decided to take the daughter of the Senator Varro in marriage, can I venture to hope that you have resolved to fling off your disguise at last."

Terence had a hard struggle to conceal the excitement into which this announcement plunged him. A confused wild whirl of emotion uplifted him and flung him down again. He was intoxicated by his own greatness and simultaneously filled with rage against Varro, who had not even considered it necessary to inform him of his intentions regarding him. But at the same time he felt grateful to Knops, whom fate had elected as the bearer of the joyful tidings, and he was very glad that he had stuck to the fellow.

Meanwhile Knops went on. He spoke of his own affairs. How equivocal his situation was. As long as the potter was still alive, he had plainly been the slave Knops. But now that Terence had ceased to exist and had re-assumed the guise of the Emperor, what was to become of him? He was left hanging in the air, so to speak. He certainly could not be a slave any longer, for in consequence of Terence's non-existence he no longer had a master. So what was he now? He ventured to hope that certain expressions concerning an approaching change which would be fortunate for him as well as for his master, expressions which had often been dropped in the factory, were not to be attributed to the potter Terence but rather to His Majesty the Emperor himself.

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Terence listened with half an ear to the busy garrulous voice of Knops. Certainly the fellow deserved his freedom, if only for his news today. But Knops must stay with him, he must not leave him, that would bring bad luck, and besides he needed him. So he said casually and condescendingly, "Of course you will be a free man from the day on which I marry Marcia." But in saying this he forgot himself and did not utter these words in the voice of the Emperor, but in the more common accents of the potter Terence.

When Knops was gone Terence gave himself up to the raptures with which the thought of his coming elevation filled him. He gloated on his marriage with Marcia Terentia, *one of the greatest ladies in the Empire*. He pictured the ceremony in the city square of Edessa, where the altar of Tarate stood, her immemorial bronze image and her symbols, the two great stone representatives of the phallus. Varro, the great Varro, the Senator whose tool he had been, the man to whom he had belonged like a dog or an ox, now gave him his daughter to do as he liked with, more, urged him to sleep with her. He pictured the nights that he would spend with Varro's daughter. But at that a slight feeling of discomfort was mingled with his joy. The name Nero stood for man. And he, Terence, had never been a great hero with women in bed; the vicissitudes of his fate, the demands that his fantasies of greatness laid upon him, had consumed his virile strength at a comparatively early age. He tried to whip himself up by imagining that Varro's daughter would be alone with him. But the thought that she was a great lady was all that excited him, nothing else about her. He felt doubtful of himself as he thought of the approaching night. His sole hope was that the feeling of his greatness would uplift him at the decisive hour.

For the rest he did not let himself be hurried into

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mistakes by the glad news ; he showed no sign of eagerness even now. He remained in retirement and worked diligently. From books and from people he met he managed to pick up countless details of Nero's life ; he practised Nero's writing until he was perfect ; he practised Nero's signature with particular care. He had been allotted a Greek and a Latin secretary, as well as a Greek and a Latin reader. With them he read the favourite authors of Nero ; also he recited Nero's poems and listened to their criticisms. That filled up his time.

He strictly refrained from showing any interest in public affairs. He would have gladly collaborated in the arrangements for his approaching marriage ; in that, as in all matters involving theatrical representation, he felt he was an expert. But when he hinted to his secretaries that the marriage procession should take a certain route they became embarrassed, and it transpired that the whole ceremony had already been completely planned and arranged for. He gave up in alarm. He was actually relieved when the tailor who came to take his measure for the marriage robes listened respectfully to his tentative suggestions.

He very seldom admitted visitors. But when his wife Caja demanded an interview he consented to see her.

He was lying on a couch, Nero to the life, and one of his readers was reading to him. "Well, what do you want, good woman ?" he asked graciously, visibly tickled. "Send that man out of the room," said Caja. She stood before him, stout and resolute, breathing tempestuously, her lips slightly parted, showing her beautiful strong teeth. Nero said to the reader, "Continue, my dear fellow." The man took up the roll again and went on reading. "Send that man out of the room," Caja persisted. "Ah, it's our dear old friend Caja," said Nero, still in a half-

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amused, half-bored voice. "Will you be good enough to tell me what you want, my dear woman?"

"Come to your senses, man," said Caja urgently. "You'll ruin us all, and you'll be the first yourself. Are you blind? For heaven's sake stop this farce and don't make yourself a laughing-stock before all these barbarians." The reader had withdrawn to a corner; he looked at the woman standing there in agitation, pleading with her husband, desperately trying to convince him. "But I have already stopped the farce," said Nero yawning. "Why do you go on playing it still? When the play is ended one takes off one's mask. Still, you have played your part well, you have not been wanting. And I shall see that you do not lose by it. Fifteen hundred sesterces a month. Take a note of that, my dear fellow," he said to the reader. "Man, Terence," Caja beseeched him, "think what you're doing. Think where you are. This time you won't get off so lightly as you did that terrible night when you came back from the Palatine. And wasn't that night an awful enough warning for you? Do you want to live through that a second time? But you'll never live through it. The gods will never forgive such presumption a second time." She walked straight up to him, seized him, shook him and said, "Come home now, Terence. Then we can consider what's to be done."

These words impressed him in spite of himself. He did his best to push them aside, he was exasperated by them, exasperated at himself for having admitted the woman, and he would have liked to give her a good beating. But he remained the Emperor. He carelessly shook her off, put the emerald to his eye, and contemplated her as if she were a strange animal. "She has lost her wits playing that role of hers," he decided. "I've been told that sometimes an actor goes mad by identifying himself

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too completely with Oedipus or Ajax. Go now, my good woman," he said graciously. "Be at rest. I shall see that you are looked after," and he patted her on the shoulder. But at the touch of his hand Caja began to tremble and sob; she said nothing more, but went.

On the following day Varro at last called on his creature. Terence felt slightly apprehensive, but he did not let it be seen. At first everything went well. Varro behaved like the complete courtier. He humbly thanked the Emperor for having deigned to raise his daughter Marcia to such eminence, submitted the programme of the wedding festivities, and respectfully requested the Imperial assent to the arrangements in which he had prevented the chief actor from taking any part.

While doing this he gave Terence certain hints how to comport himself so as to resemble as closely as possible the real Emperor. He tried to insinuate these hints inconspicuously, yet in spite of that could not refrain from infusing into them a touch of contemptuous irony. And one remark he made actually managed to pierce Terence's hide. He said, "I regret to see that Your Majesty is using your emerald much oftener than before. I must assume therefore that your short-sightedness has grown worse with the years, though usually it is supposed to decrease with age. Short-sightedness no doubt has its advantages, it enables one to see things near one more sharply. The question remains," he added reflectively, "whether in spite of that the wider vision which we share with common mortals is not to be preferred in the long run."

The proud Varro never imagined that his former slave would detect the sneer in his words. But contempt will pierce even the armour of a tortoise, and Terence had no armour, but a very sensitive hide. Accordingly he

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dropped the precious stone which had given him so much pleasure and helped him over many an awkward moment. He knit his brows angrily and helplessly and during all the rest of the conversation he did not make use of the emerald again.

CHAPTER XXV

NERO'S WEDDING

AFTER Marcia had decided to marry the scum—for so she called Terence in her thoughts—she too put on a mask so that nobody might observe her fears and her disgust.

Oh, how she would have liked to talk the matter over with Fronto. Since she had fled from Antioch with her father, renounced her dreams and resolved to encourage Fronto to propose to her, her thoughts had often lingered on that immaculate Roman gentleman, who had so frequently in his reticent way showed that he admired her. At night in her bed she wondered how the man would respond when she brought him her long-preserved virginity, a gift beyond price. She would lie with eyes shut, resisting yet forcing herself to submit, cold yet burning, passionate and yet vestal-like. But just because she had been thinking so much about Fronto, just because her desires were fixed upon him, she could not bring herself now to speak openly to him as a friend about the dreadful ordeal that awaited her ; for now he was both less and more than a friend.

So she bore her desires and fears in silence. Her mother had instilled into her a shrinking horror of all physical things. She had been destined to guard the sacred flame of Vesta, to live in the pure house of the

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Vestals in the Via Sacra, uplifted like the eagle above the common people and their common lusts. Varro had said no. That had made her mother hate him more than ever, and she had taught Marcia to loathe his licentious life. The mother had prophesied and Marcia had believed that he would come to a bad end, and when he was actually struck from the list of senators Marcia resolved to follow the strict path of her mother yet more strictly ; she regarded it as her task to guard the honour of her great and famous house.

Yet now, in spite of all this, she had been forced along her father's path. Before her lay a fate as equivocal as his own. She was to be the wife of a man who was at the same time Emperor and slave. But what troubled her most was that this prospect filled her with many feelings besides loathing. For just as she hated but also envied and admired her father for his wild courses, so in spite of her repulsion the life that awaited her now had a wild and mysterious attraction for her.

It was against Roman convention for her betrothed to see her before the marriage day. She tried to recreate in memory the face and form of Terence, whom she had encountered now and then ; she did not succeed. But she had never forgotten the bloated face of the Emperor Nero ; she had often seen him in her childhood. For long she would pause before the statues which had been set up again in the Emperor's honour, and try to picture that stony figure coming to life and flinging its arms round her, lying in bed with her face to face, pressing her close to it ; and she was filled with such terror that her heart stopped, and with such desire that all her limbs burned.

But it was not the Emperor Nero, it was the potter Terence, a man of common blood, a lump of offal, with whom she had to couple ; she no longer knew where her feelings were leading her.

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But she had always practised self-control, and once she had definitely decided, she was outwardly the Emperor's betrothed and nothing more. She scrupulously fulfilled the countless conventional duties which Roman tradition imposed upon a bride.

When the eve of the wedding day came she obediently let herself be robed in the yellowish flame-coloured bridal dress and, as custom prescribed, dedicated her virginal garments and her toys to the gods of her father's house.

She did not sleep well that night. Her dreams of Fronto were mingled with the lustful pictures which had overcome her in gazing at the statue of the Emperor. She longed with such intensity to see this man who called himself Nero that her face burned.

But when next morning he appeared in his chariot, splendid in purple, and with a large retinue, to conduct her to the ceremony, she felt disappointed. He was Imperial in speech and gesture ; he was radiant ; but the enchantment which had seized her in gazing at the statues refused to come. She was conscious neither of the reverence which she had felt before the symbol of supreme power, nor of the superiority which she had felt towards the slave, nor of any desire for the man as a man. She felt merely empty. This man who stretched out his hand to her was a nobody, a husk without a kernel, a shape indistinguishable from any other shape. She would have to share the supreme hour of her life with a nonentity.

They drove in state to the city square of Edessa. The multitude stood in breathless silence while the Emperor and Marcia approached the altar of Tarate ; Marcia was wearing the traditional bridal dress, the long white tunica with the woollen girdle ingeniously tied in Hercules knots, so that the bridegroom might show his skill in loosening them ; and over that the bridal cloak of the customary nuptial yellowish flame-coloured hue. Her

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high-heeled shoes and her bridal veil were also flame-coloured. On her hair which, according to usage, was dressed in six high rolls, she wore the mural crown; its massive splendour made her narrow pale face look doubly fragile and austere.

After the sacrifice had been made and the entrails examined, the priests announced that Tarate approved of the marriage. The marriage contract was signed. Then the bride pronounced the formula: "As you my husband are called Claudius Nero, I shall henceforth call myself Claudia."

Terence replied: "I, Claudius Nero, consent that you call yourself Claudia." And the bridesmaid joined their right hands. Then, while the priests offered the sacrifice of fruit, the bride and bridegroom sat with covered heads on two chairs, over the backs of which was spread the fell of the ram sacrificed that morning. Then they turned towards the altar, which was on their right; before them went a boy who scattered incense into the flames of the altar.

After the banquet in Varro's house the marriage train proceeded to King Mallukh's palace as the house of the bridegroom. The people shouted, "Talasse, talasse." From time immemorial the exact meaning of this word had been unknown, but it had nevertheless a quite comprehensible obscene signification. The Emperor's escort scattered nuts among the people, and these had been gilded, since they were the bounty of the Emperor. Before Marcia a boy carried a torch of white-thorn wood. When the procession arrived at the palace the people flung themselves upon this torch, tore it into countless pieces and fought for the slivers; for the gods granted long life to everybody who could snatch a sliver of a bridal torch, and a still longer one naturally if the torch was that of an emperor's bride.

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Marcia was lifted across the threshold. In the main room the wide bridal bed was set up. Beside it had been facetiously erected a stone image of the priapic god Mutunus Tutunus, tutelary deity of the newly married. Marcia was placed on his knees, so that she leant against his mighty phallus.

There she sat now on the knees of the indecent statue. The bridal attendants at length withdrew ; she was alone with the man. What would happen now ? All day he had remained unchanged, languid and dignified, not in the least exciting those feelings which the proximity of such an exalted personage might be expected to call forth, but also in no way giving ground for mockery or contempt. Now he was alone with her, Nero the man, her Nero, her man. He really did look like one of those statues. And would the stone become flesh and do what she had dreamed ?

For the potter Terence it had been a great but very exhausting day. At the start Varro had handed him a list on which was set down everything he had to do. After his practice in conning the classical tragedians, Terence had memorised the list quite easily, and during the whole day had behaved in the most approved Emperor-like manner. But his concentration on his task had kept him from enjoying his greatness. And now he was alone with this pale and haughty senator's daughter, who obviously expected that he would at once proceed to deflower her.

Now it was certainly a great honour that she and the others expected from him. Besides, though he would have preferred a slightly plumper and better covered bride, that morning he had felt greatly attracted by her ; she had seemed actually beautiful ; but after all these endless ceremonies he was cursedly tired, quite done up, and would really have preferred to sleep by himself. Moreover, although on Varro's list there were all sorts of instructions

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for comporting himself, they were all for the daytime and not for the night. What should he do? Should he untie these accursed knots with which her girdle was tied, or should he himself undress first? Come, he must do something. A man who had achieved such great things could surely manage to please a girl. To fire himself he called up all sorts of lustful pictures. They did not generate the necessary excitement. Marcia sat quite still. He contemplated his hands. He had attended to them with great care, they were white and perfumed. Already there had been complete silence for some time. Something must be done. "Well, my Marcia," he said, going up to her, but not with the walk of Nero; there was no need to trouble about that now, he must conserve his strength for other demands. He cautiously removed her bridal cloak, and instead of flinging it on the floor, carefully and economically spread the precious garment over the back of a chair. Hesitatingly he took the mural crown from her hair and tried to untie the intricately fastened knots of her girdle, sighing softly the while. Still quite motionless, Marcia let him do as he pleased. When he happened to touch her brow or her arm he realised that she was cold as ice.

Now only the tunica remained. He told himself that till now he had not comported himself exactly as an Emperor should, and decided to show his mettle. He took a good hold of the belt of the tunica, and when it would not give violently broke it. Marcia sat before him naked, shivering, white; her thin pointed breasts were exposed. He seized her, she was quite light, and bore her across to the bed. She lay there breathing through her teeth. "Put out the light," she said imploringly.

He undressed and lay down beside her. She was still very cold and that exasperated him. He brutally clasped her to him. She shuddered and gave a shivering

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sigh. "Since she's so cold," he thought, "she needn't expect her husband to be on fire." He hoped that if he could become angry it would be easier. So he became angry because of her silence and because she would not help him. He seized her more roughly. "Call me Red Beard," he whispered to her; for that was what the Emperor's first mistress, Acte, had called him, and that, people said, was what he had liked best to be called. She was silent. He clutched her so tightly that she gave a little cry. "So she's sorry for herself, is she?" he thought grimly, squeezing and pinching her. "No," she said at last, "No."

He let her go as if the word had stung him. "If she doesn't want it," he thought offendedly, "Nero isn't the man to press himself upon her." He turned his back on her, content that things should be as they were. All day he had behaved in a highly Emperor-like manner, and now he had earned a good sleep. He thumped the pillow to make it more comfortable, and wondered whether he should bid her good night or pretend to be offended. Being at bottom a good-natured man, he growled, "Good night" in Greek, because that seemed more refined; also there was noth to be negotiated. Then he went to sleep. After a little while he began to snore softly.

Marcia lay on, rigid, empty, deeply disappointed. She was angry that the man had dared to make up to her, still more angry that he had stopped doing so. She told herself that it was her natural superiority that had daunted the slave. She should feel proud that she had kept the animal from wreaking his will on her. But her pride quickly faded. She felt his body beside her and listened to his breath. "Red Beard," she said softly, furious at herself for not having responded to him at once. She stroked the places where he had pinched her. They still hurt. Tomorrow she would be black and blue; that was

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all that she would have of her wedding night. Her chagrin tormented her physically, making her hot and cold by turns.

He lay beside her sleeping, softly snoring.

All night she could not get warm. At the first sign of day she rose. She walked about the room in her bare feet, with her stiff virginal tread. She looked at her bridal cloak neatly hanging over the back of the chair. "And that man claims to be Nero," she thought.

CHAPTER XXVI

CRAFT

WHEN Cejonius received Fronto's report of the events in Edessa, he was almost more alarmed now than furious. It seemed that Varro hated him so deeply that he was prepared to force his daughter to sleep with a slave so as to injure him. He now saw clearly what he had always guessed : neither Pakor nor Artaban was the real foe of Rome ; Rome's real enemy lived in Roman territory and was called Lucius Terentius Varro. He alone was to blame that the East could have no peace. His profound dislike of the man had been justified from the beginning.

Now he realised clearly that more was involved than a mere personal quarrel between Varro and himself ; he, Cejonius, was the new Rome, with its responsible temper and its sober reason, while Varro was the incarnate licentiousness of the old Rome ; a man of passion, perhaps of genius, but also of that unbridled irresponsibility which, under Nero, had made methodical administration impossible and had endangered the very existence of the Empire.

He read the clear, flawless report which Fronto had sent him. A wild rage mounted in him. "We must march," he decided furiously. "I'll send ten thousand men across the Euphrates. Hunt out these two villains, that wretched swindler Terence and Varro himself, the

arch intriguer, the traitor. Depose the beggarly Mallukh, and give the High Priest Sharbil a drubbing. Execute that man Varro and crucify his rascal of a slave." He was almost sorry now that Fronto had behaved so coolly and reasonably. He would almost have preferred the garrison of Edessa to be butchered, so that he might have some ground for intervention.

His advisers had hard work keeping him from acting hastily. But he was forced to realise that the idea of a military expedition against Edessa was out of the question. That would only give Artaban a welcome pretext to end the inner chaos in Parthia by appealing for a holy war against Rome, would give him his opportunity to cross the Tigris and attack Rome. The Palatine regarded his own achievement in reinstating peace in the East as the most valuable service he had rendered it. The Emperor Titus liked to be known as the peaceful Emperor. A governor who failed to avoid war with Parthia or who actually provoked it could count on falling into the Emperor's bad graces. No, Cejonius must confine himself to addressing a few more ineffective notes to Edessa. He must look on with tied hands while Varro went on spinning his plots and laughing at him. His fury almost choked him; the red patches on his cheeks deepened. In the government palace at Antioch everyone went about on tiptoe.

A council of war was held every day. The Governor begged, implored, and cursed his advisers. This sort of thing could not go on. His advisers racked their brains. They must find some way out. They were trained diplomats. They found a way out.

It was true that Rome itself could hardly undertake a military expedition. But what if one of the vassal states were requested to do a bit of policing and lay hands on the criminals in accordance with the existing treaties?

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For example, they could ask King Philip of Commagene, the next-door neighbour of Edessa, to seize and deliver up Varro and Terence, employing the civil arm. If King Philip took on that duty—and they had the means to force him to do so—then they were amply covered. If Parthia made any objection, they could simply sacrifice King Philip; they could declare that he had strangely overstepped the powers granted to him, which were strictly confined to mere police-work.

Cejonius, greedily peering out for any possibility of action, breathed freely again. On the same day a letter was despatched to King Philip of Commagene.

CHAPTER XXVII

REASON AND PASSION

WHEN Varro heard of that letter a sense of weariness and despondency fell upon him. He was vexed that at his age, he was between fifty and sixty, he should have let passion involve him in such a grim and costly gamble. Of course it was more than a gamble ; Alexander's idea of uniting Asia and Europe was at stake. But could it be that he, Varro, was supporting that idea merely because it gave him a free field for his gambler's passion, his thirst for power and excitement ?

For a long time he sat at his desk, feeling old and useless. Very slowly his old energy and his old capacity for clear thought returned again. Yes, the plan they had hatched out in Antioch was extremely ingenious ; it was a good idea not to use their own troops, but to make Philip use his instead. The Parthian King Artaban might conceivably attack Roman troops, but never native Syrian troops. If it came to an armed conflict between Commagene and Edessa, then he, Varro, and his Nero could expect help from no side ; their cause was lost.

If it came to an armed conflict. Therefore everything depended upon King Philip of Commagene. Would he, must he, fulfil Cejonius's request ?

Varro put himself in Philip's place. Philip was a man a little over thirty, a descendant of Greek and Persian

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Kings, a highly cultured man who was pre-eminent in the East for fostering the sciences and arts. Nero had liked and shown favour to the prince of Commagene. The present rulers of Rome intrigued against him. Rough old Vespasian could not stand the hyper-sensitive King Philip, and Titus found him altogether too Eastern. Philip was much too clever to stand out against Rome; he replied to every piece of chicanery with new expressions of homage. Yet in his heart, Varro was certain, he hated these rough brutal soldiers who represented to him the power of Rome. His heart was certainly with the man who called himself Nero, whoever he might be. But Commagene lay on the Roman bank of the Euphrates; in its capital, Samosata, there was a strong Roman garrison, and if King Philip raised difficulties the Romans could simply annex his country without further ado. So wasn't he almost certain to submit to Cejonius's wishes, simply because he must?

The young King's friends said of him that he combined in himself all the good qualities of the Persians, the Greeks and the Syrians: the Persian religious sense, Greek culture, Syrian craft. His enemies asserted that he united all the vices of the three races: Persian vacillation, Greek effeminacy, Syrian treachery. Varro had only twice met King Philip. They had found great pleasure in each other's company. Now his fate lay in the hands of this man. Varro decided to go to Samosata.

He set out on the same day.

King Philip was both painfully and agreeably surprised. Varro must have heard of the letter from Antioch: so why did he now put himself in his hands? What could be behind it? But Philip was a courteous man. While they sat at table neither he nor Varro made any reference to the question that was agitating them. They conversed on art and literature, while Philip

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wondered whether he should station guards outside Varro's door, much as he sympathised with him, and despatch him next morning to Antioch.

But after they had finished Varro suddenly began : "Don't you think it's very friendly of me, King Philip, to spare you the trouble of a military expedition by putting myself in your hands?" King Philip could no longer conceal his agitation. He got up. He was a tall man with thin legs and a weak chin ; he walked up and down with awkward irregular steps, then stopped before Varro, gazed piercingly into his face with his large myopic eyes and said : "I certainly am surprised, my Varro. I need hardly tell you how painful the Governor's request is to me. But a man who knows the East as well as you must know that I'm bound to carry it out." "Of course you must carry it out," Varro agreed. "We, my Nero and I, have little chance of success. Even if Artaban were to put twenty or thirty thousand men at our disposition, which is by no means certain, in all probability Rome would win in the end. Reason, King Philip, commands you to agree to the Governor's request. Besides, that would be to your advantage in all sorts of ways. They'll conquer Edessa, divide up its territory, and probably give you a large share of it after you have victoriously carried out your punitive expedition."

King Philip, tall and delicate, gazed down helplessly at the calm Varro. It was all quite true what he said. He himself could not have formulated better the reasons why, against his will, he would have to obey Rome. He was confused and disappointed. In his heart he had hoped that Varro would not strengthen him in his grounds for action, but find some pretext for not acting at all.

But Varro had not finished yet. After a long silence he began again : "In Edessa, certainly, in all Mesopotamia, and probably at the court of King Artaban as well, there

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will be some surprise if King Philip hands the Emperor Nero and myself over to the Roman usurper. People will say that if little Edessa had the pluck to stand up for Nero, Commagene, which is much bigger, might have dared to do so too. Probably Artaban is only waiting for a second Mesopotamian state to recognise Nero, so as to come in himself. But why should King Philip bother his head over a few million indignant Syrian patriots, if he can annex a good slice of Edessa to his own country?"

Curiously enough, King Philip listened not without pleasure while Varro jeered at his vacillation and dependence. Philip loved riches and splendour, he had a passion for building, and the prospect of erecting new palaces, baths, theatres, a whole new city from the booty he would win in Edessa gladdened his heart. But on the other hand he was deeply tempted to seize the chance of rebelling at last against these arrogant and brutal bullies of the West, who whenever they could so blatantly made him realise his weakness. It was no joke to be forced to march against the friendly neighbouring state of Edessa. It was no joke that he, the Syrian King, the man on whom all Syrian Mesopotamia put its hopes, should be employed as a sort of hangman.

Varro went on: "I think I have shown you that I appreciate your reasons for acting in such a way and that I do not bear you any ill-will for following them. But now that the whole matter is settled, now that you are about to hand me over to Jumping Jack, with a troubled heart, I suppose I may assume, but with my approval, will you allow me to ask a blunt question?" "Please do so," said King Philip. Long and thin, he was sitting beneath a huge statue of Minerva which itself, after the mode of the time, was long and thin. "You will submit to Rome, then," said Varro, "and Rome will reward you and increase your territory. But that will not go on for long ;

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presently Rome will address a new demand to you which you will find it expedient to grant, you will give way again for the same reasons as now, then Rome will demand yet more of you, and finally the day will come when you will find yourself compelled to refuse. Or else you will be forced to give until there is nothing more left for you to give. Don't you think, in other words, that Rome, in spite of your good behaviour, will find a pretext sometime for annexing Commagene?"

King Philip's mouth hung open a little. He stared into Varro's face; he looked clever, melancholy, the late degenerate heir of great kings. He said nothing, but his whole expression was a worried and bitter yes.

Varro savoured his silence. Then he said: "I thank you for your answer. Edessa is smaller than Commagene. King Mallukh is not a very cultured man, and Sharbil is a priest filled with fanatical prejudices. But they have a sound idea of actualities in their Syrian heads, and when the Governor of Syria asked them to deliver up Nero and myself they probably recognised just as clearly as you and I what reason demanded. I don't know what moved these two men to turn down Rome's request in spite of that. Perhaps this is what they thought: if we always give way, then there is a hundred per cent chance that Rome will swallow us in the end. But if we seize this heaven-sent opportunity to stand out, then there is only a ninety per cent chance that Rome will swallow us. Better to take a ten per cent chance now than have none at all later.

"You are young, King Philip. Even if they should annex your kingdom later, they'll leave you your royal title and a part of your revenues, you'll live in Rome, you'll take your seat in the Senate, have poets, artists, and beautiful women at your court, you'll be rid of the many worries which kingship brings with it, and Rome is

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so far away from Samosata that the curses of the gods and peoples of the East will be a faint echo in your ears like the sound of distant surf. The life of a great gentleman in Rome has its charms. Nobody knows that better than I do ; for, as you must know, a few weeks ago I still had the possibility of leading a life in Rome such as I have just described. You are surprised that I stuck to my Nero in spite of that. I can't myself altogether understand it. We of the older generation don't prize reason quite so highly as the younger men. And it may be that our reason is a different kind from theirs, so that even the most luxurious life would not appear desirable in our eyes if we had to renounce certain abstractions to gain it."

King Philip still sat immovably against the Minerva statue. His long pale face looked almost stupid, he was listening so intently. "Please go on, my Varro," he said at last, when the Senator had fallen silent. "I have finished what I had to say," replied Varro. "Except for this, perhaps. Isn't it a stupid irony of fate that the success of our Nero should depend simply on this : whether we can hold out for these first few weeks without Rome coming down on us ? If the Emperor can manage to hold out for four weeks, even for three weeks, until King Artaban declares for him, then his claim is assured for years to come. If he had only one actual success to point to ; if, for instance, Artaban were to come to his support, if the East asserted clearly, Nero lives, Nero is here, Nero reigns, then his mere name, his mere existence, would mean a standing threat to Rome, even if for a time he had no great number of troops behind him. After that he could easily vanish for a few months in the wilderness and not appear again until his chances had improved. Rome has a great army, but it hasn't sufficient soldiers to search for him through the whole East. If they did, it would mean a new war with Parthia, and as things stand

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to-day Rome does not want that at any price. Edessa in itself is too small. But if Edessa and Commagene were both to support him, then Nero would be safe in his saddle, then he could begin to ride forward."

King Philip kept his eyes fixed on the other man's mouth. This man had taken the decision which he himself would like to take if he only had the courage. This man Varro, knowing the limitations which hedged him in, had descended deeply into his nature and from depths where reason no longer ruled had drawn the strength to conquer reason. He liked and admired the man: taking a far view, mightn't it be actually wiser to behave heroically? The man was quite right: if he, Philip, continued to yield to the Romans, then beyond doubt his ostensible sovereignty in Commagene would soon come to an end; while if he stood out against them he had some hope, even if it were only a small one, of forestalling that end.

"I shall consult with the Roman Commandant Trebonius, my dear Varro," said King Philip almost cheerfully, now that he had made his decision. "And don't take it ill of me," he said, concluding the audience, and smiling broadly, "if for some time I station a guard outside your door."

CHAPTER XXVIII

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TREBONIUS had risen from the ranks. Now he was an officer in the fourteenth legion. He was the most popular soldier in the East. Everybody knew of his exploits in the Armenian and the Jewish wars. On duty he was strict to the verge of brutality, but off duty he fraternised with his men and went drinking and whoring in their company. He was a fleshy man with a round head and a powerful neck and brown hair which was turning grey ; his crude jokes were famed far and wide. He was the darling of the army, and the population worshipped him and cheered him wherever he appeared.

In the Government Palace in Antioch and at army headquarters in Rome his popularity was of course well-known. The Emperor Vespasian, who appreciated popular humour, had once contemplated raising him to the nobility ; but certain over-fastidious aristocrats who considered Trebonius really too vulgar for that objected, and Vespasian gave up the idea. Of humble birth, and not yet elevated to equestrian rank, Trebonius could not hope to rise above the post which he already enjoyed. And no matter how heartily he jeered at the tinpot aristocrats, or how often he swore that the affection of the army was more to him than a general's title, the fact

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that these people had shut him out of their circle gnawed at his vanity.

He was ambitious and had won many decorations. Hewas the possessor of the purple banner and of the armlet given for conspicuous bravery, and he and his horse Victor wore the highest decoration the army could give. But he did not possess the mural crown, the golden crown which was accorded to those who first succeeded in scaling the walls of a besieged town. Trebonius considered that he had earned that distinction on two occasions. Yet he had nothing but a contemptuous shrug or a roar of angry laughter for the swindlers who had refused it to him and given it to other men instead. Nevertheless that lack was a thorn in his flesh.

So far as their title and their outward rank were concerned, Fronto in Edessa and Trebonius in Samosata were on a rough equality. But the authorities in Antioch knew very well why they appointed the fine aristocrat Fronto as commander of a mere five hundred men in Edessa, and put the two thousand men who garrisoned the four chief cities of the kingdom of Commagene under Trebonius. In Edessa diplomatic ability was required, the post of Roman commandant there was extremely ticklish.

Also by sending Trebonius to Samosata they humiliated the despised King Philip on the one hand by making him treat with a mere plebeian, while on the other they rewarded the universal favourite, who possessed no very striking abilities, with a fat post requiring no particular attention. By acting in this way the military authorities merely succeeded in annoying both officers; for Fronto longed for the cultivation of Samosata, and Trebonius for the ticklish and responsible post in Edessa.

Trebonius indemnified himself for the wound to his ambition by unscrupulously exploiting the population of

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Commagene. He showed openly that he considered himself, and not Philip, to be the real ruler of Commagene. He enriched himself by all sorts of bribery and intimidation. He strutted in all his vulgarity through the fine city of Samosata, his hundred odd decorations dangling over his expensive robes, sporting arms as rich as the army regulations permitted. He held court like a prince or a great marshal, and tirelessly hunted the women and the wild game of the country.

King Philip could not deny that the Romans had been right in sending this man to him out of the countless officers at their disposal. It was true that he, the descendant of Persian and Greek gods and kings, loathed the very sight of the fellow. But when Trebonius familiarly tugged at his robe with his stubby fingers or put his hairy arm round his shoulders, Philip did not shrink away. He could see through his Trebonius. The man was a gambler and an adventurer, a victim of his vulgar lusts, also a man wounded in his vanity. One could imagine circumstances in which such a man might be useful.

Such a case had happened now. Immediately after his conversation with Varro King Philip sent for Trebonius.

Trebonius appeared in great good humour. He seated himself importantly on one of the king's fine chairs. "Well, King Philip," he began in his loud brazen voice, "yours truly is looking forward to this stroll to Edessa. You'll have the pleasure of seeing old Trebonius in his element now. People say you'll find the most dainty bits of fluff between Corinth and Susa in King Mallukh's harem. They'll provide us with some fun in our old age. You can have two, if you like, for my one. But you're making a face as if you had swallowed a lemon, young King. I tell you we'll settle the hash of this Nero and this Mallukh and this Sharbil in a couple of shakes. And we've got Varro already." He burst out laughing.

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Philip did not show how much his ear was pained by the man's vulgar familiarities and the Dalmatian dialect in which he brought them out. "Naturally I feel honoured," he replied languidly in his pure Latin, which always infuriated Trebonius by its grace, "that Rome should have entrusted me with this great task. But there are one or two bitter drops in the cup. First, I am very reluctant to proceed against my friend Mallukh." Trebonius grinned broadly. "I can understand that, young King," he replied. "No doubt you're scared that you'll be the next yourself and we'll swallow you up, not to speak of your country. Nothing in it. If you behave nicely Trebonius will put in a good word for you. And that will be listened to, even on the Palatine."

"Thanks for your good wishes," smiled Philip. "There are two other drops I don't much care for," he continued. "I have legal scruples. My treaty with Rome obliges me to assist the Emperor and his representatives in any lawful measures he may institute against his subjects in my territory. But since when has Edessa been a part of my territory?" "And you actually worry your head over such idle hair-splittings, young King?" Trebonius asked. "I'm no lawyer. But our lawyers will manage to find a loophole out of that difficulty, don't you fear. For instance, we could simply give you a slice of Edessa. Then it would be your territory. I'll answer for that." He seized the King by the robe and laughed until the chains and decorations on his chest and arms rang.

Philip got up; he stationed himself, long and thin, beside his Minerva statue. "And now for the third drop, the bitterest of all," he said in a toneless voice. "The Emperor Nero is the last descendant of the house of Julius Caesar, and I am the last descendant of the house of Alexander. Perhaps you may think such ideas sentimental: but if this man in Edessa should really be Nero

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it seems really degrading that I, the descendant of Alexander, should be asked to deliver up the descendant of Caesar to the hangman. And are you sure that the man isn't Nero after all? Listen, the Senator Varro actually came here expressly to assure me that the man is Nero. It was for that purpose and that purpose alone that he voluntarily put himself into my hands."

"He knows how to bear himself, this lad Philip," Trebonius was thinking. "How cleverly he rubbed in his high birth. It's easy enough to behave like a king if you have practised nothing else since your childhood. If I were to order him: step to the right, present lance to the left, he would be left standing." Aloud he said, "You ask whether I'm sure? How can one be certain of anything in this filthy world? But if Titus as the head of the Roman army says that the man in Edessa is not Nero, then he isn't Nero, that's all." King Philip dreamily contemplated his long hands and said as if to himself: "It may be that the head of the Roman army is a good soldier, and Nero by all accounts wasn't. But Nero wasn't a niggler either, and these new good soldiers of yours aren't very free-handed. The troops loved Nero, there's no denying it. When the legions see the Emperor Nero perhaps they'll fight for him rather than fight against him. I was a child the only time I saw him. But even now my knees tremble when I see one of his statues. I feel I would be drawing down the curses of the gods on me and my country if I raised my hand against the Emperor Nero, the friend of the East."

Trebonius had been listening attentively, and his large mouth had not twisted even once into a smile. He now replied as Fronto had replied to Sharbil: "These are questions for a king, not for a plain soldier." "I am surprised," the King politely retorted, "to hear my Trebonius falling back on his rank as a mere soldier. I

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could mention other cases in which Trebonius hasn't thought and acted exactly like a soldier, but more like a prince of Commagene. And isn't it a curious proof of the gratitude of certain people that my Trebonius hasn't reached a higher rank yet in the army? A good soldier has a claim to be rewarded generously. Perhaps it would be more really soldierly to fight for Nero, who is generous and great-minded, instead of for other people I could mention."

Trebonius felt uncomfortable. What was the man getting at? What could be behind it when the docile Philip became impudent and stiff-necked all of a sudden? Philip was a man without a chin, a weakling; but he was a fox. Varro too was a fox. The fact that these two foxes considered they could safely oppose the orders of Cejonius made him thoughtful. To carry out the instructions of the Governor would not bring much honour to Philip, but it would bring him considerable advantage. Were Nero's friends making him a higher offer? Could Philip have received assurances from Parthia?

Trebonius liked having things clear. He asked bluntly and rudely: "What does this mean, young King? Does it mean that you refuse to obey the orders of Rome?" Philip smiled. He strolled up to Trebonius. Looking him in the eye and still smiling, he said: "What can you be thinking of, my Trebonius? King Philip refuse? Of course I'll obey. We have Varro already. And in two weeks, if Mallukh hasn't given up the other man by then, we'll march against Edessa." "Well then," barked Trebonius, but he could scarcely hide his bewilderment; he could not make out whether the King was having a joke with him or what he was really after. He could not even decide if he was glad or disappointed that all had passed off so smoothly.

He was to be further strengthened in these doubts.

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For as he took his' leave the impudent young King returned to his former equivocal tone and said : "So we have still two weeks. Two weeks is a long time. Please consider well during these two weeks whether this man in Edessa mightn't turn out after all to be a generous ruler, one who would never think of leaving a man like Trebonius in his comparatively humble post."

CHAPTER XXIX

A WAR IN THE ORIENT

TREBONIUS took the King's advice and considered.

He saw several alluring possibilities. For instance, he could write to Antioch reporting his conversation with King Philip. They were accumulating material there against the King of Commagene, to be used if they should ever want to annex his country. So Trebonius would gain credit by adding to that material. But what reward would he have for his pains? The present Roman Government would never raise him to the nobility, and he had already all they could give him with the exception of that.

On the other hand, if he declared for this Nero—he, the immensely popular Trebonius—that would be a service for which he could demand any price he chose; that sly native, the King, had been quite right there. They would give him senator's rank, make him a general, perhaps even give him the high command. If the business miscarried and Nero failed to maintain himself, then there always remained the remedy of decamping across the Tigris with his men before it was too late, and taking service with the Parthians. They could always find employment for such a famous soldier, especially if he brought with him a few thousand well-drilled Roman soldiers.

Trebonius usually shrugged his shoulders when

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Fronto's name was mentioned, but the behaviour of that same Fronto, who now held the great citadel of Edessa almost by himself, had worried him for a long time. He considered Fronto's behaviour strange and unsoldierly. Now he asked himself whether Fronto too might not see possibilities of advancement in this man Nero.

He snorted impatiently. What was he to do? Service in Titus's army had become boring. There was no prospect of a real thorough-going war under such sober and calculating masters. Service under Nero would be quite a different business. There was prospect of fighting and to spare, fighting that would be like balm to the heart of an old soldier. There was a risk in taking the side of Nero. But to live dangerously was surely the meaning of a soldier's life. He always grinned when he impressed on his recruits the countless sentences on the duty of not risking one's life needlessly which took up such a large part of the army instructions of the Flavians.

When he first heard of the appearance of Nero he had dismissed the matter with a few pungent witticisms. He had been too hasty. Now the business looked quite different. Varro, Philip and he were all three of them foxes. Why shouldn't three foxes, considering the reward would be high posts under Nero, settle with the she-wolf of Rome for good. She was old and infirm and had few sound teeth left in her head. And what a joke it would be if that fine fellow Fronto offered to join the dance. Too late, my dear fellow. You can't sup with Nero and with Titus at the same time.

Trebonius did not wait for two weeks; on the third day he once more appeared before King Philip. Cejonius had given him explicit instructions, had made it clear that he must keep up the fiction that the King of Com-magene was entrusted merely with a necessary piece of

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police-work. Rome desired to remain free from all responsibility in the eyes of Parthia ; if trouble rose, then Cejonius would produce proof that King Philip had arbitrarily overstepped his instructions. Therefore Trebonius's task was to induce King Philip to proceed against Edessa with all the means at his disposal, but in such a way that all responsibility could be pushed on to the King in case of trouble. Trebonius had with him the long letter in which Cejonius outlined this sinister scheme. He did not show it to the King, but he drew it out several times, read it through, grinned to himself, quoted certain sentences, and let King Philip clearly recognise their questionable meaning. The King had never imagined that the politics of the Romans was particularly moral. Nevertheless he welcomed Cejonius's perfidy as a further justification of his own resolution.

They talked at large for some time. Then Trebonius suddenly went up to King Philip, took hold of the hem of his robe and growled, meanwhile looking deep into his eyes : "And now, young King, we're going to have a real heart to heart talk. Tell me in confidence : is this man in Edessa really the great, generous and open-handed Emperor Nero, yes or no ?" King Philip stood motionless while Trebonius puffed his bad breath into his face ; he kept his brown eyes fixed steadily on the greyish-blue eyes of the other man and said calmly : "My own feelings and Varro's evidence are all in favour of the assumption." Trebonius took a step back and replied with dignity in the same terms as Fronto had once used : "I am only a simple officer. In such a difficult business as this a king and a senator must surely see their way more clearly than a plain soldier." But he immediately flung off his dignity again, began to grin broadly, burst out laughing, slapped his leg and said : "A splendid joke. We'll drive Jumping Jack out and put this Nero in. Capital." Then he

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returned to his official tone, "Of course we may take it, young King, that the Governor's instructions are to be carried out. By me and by you. The expedition against Edessa must take place. I'll see to it that you're provided with a strong enough force. For your moral support I can give you three hundred men. The rest is up to you. And you'll have to accept all responsibility." He blinked at Philip with his light, almost lashless eyes.

Varro was accordingly held in honourable custody, and a letter was sent to King Mallukh in which Philip of Commagene politely but firmly requested him to give up the man who called himself the Emperor Nero. Most seriously he advised his friend and brother monarch to submit to the just demands of the Roman Governor while there was yet time. The letter ended with the announcement that if the man was not delivered up within two weeks, then he, Philip of Commagene, would be regretfully compelled in accordance with his treaty with the Roman Emperor to enforce the Governor's demand by sending troops into Edessa.

A copy of this letter went to Antioch, accompanied by the information that Varro was already in the King's hands. The King also hoped to lay hold of the other offender. Whereupon he would deliver up the two men to the Governor as required.

To give it added point King Philip sent the original letter to Edessa by his cousin, the young prince Seleukus. The young prince had a long interview with King Mallukh and the High Priest Sharbil in which he commented on the clauses in the letter. He spoke as one Oriental prince to another, confidentially but with great dignity, while the fountain plashed. He related how honourable was the detention in which King Philip kept the Senator Varro. How interesting the conversations which he daily had with his prisoner. What a trifling number of Roman

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soldiers were to take part in the expedition against Edessa, a mere three hundred men. He did not conceal his fear that the native troops of Commagene, accustomed as they were to letting the Romans do the greater part of the fighting, might prove somewhat cold when ordered to attack Edessa and the Emperor Nero. He personally imagined that if these troops were met by a strong and resolute resistance soon after crossing the Euphrates, at the ninth milestone, say, where the road branched off to Batnae, they would pretty quickly turn tail and let the three hundred Romans fight it out for themselves. Moreover, he went on, Trebonius himself was not entirely convinced that Nero was a traitor, and if the Emperor should demonstrate his genuineness by a really Imperial gratuity, Trebonius would scarcely remain indifferent to such an argument. This was the manner, then, in which the King of Commagene sent his greetings to his old friend and present enemy, the King of Edessa, challenging him to the arbitrament of arms, if he persisted in refusing the Roman Governor's request.

Some days later a number of Persian and Arabian merchants chanced to converge at the ninth milestone of the road from Samosata to Edessa, at the point where the road branched off to Batnae. These business men were surprisingly familiar with military matters. They discussed for a long time what might happen if a battle between a Commagene and an Edessa army were to take place there. They considered every possible aspect of this contingency, and came to the conclusion that in all probability it would end with a defeat for Commagene.

These intelligent merchants proved to be good prophets. When three weeks later the battle they had feared took place it actually ended with the defeat of the Commagene army.

The three hundred Roman soldiers who took part

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in the fight could not make out at first what was happening. Trebonius considered that in certain cases a soldier should know how to die for his commander, and accordingly thought it best not to enlighten his men. The Roman soldiers could not understand, therefore, why their comrades from Commagene were going through such curious evolutions; they had never seen such a queer fight, and almost a hundred of them were killed before the others grasped the position and let themselves be taken prisoner.

In great triumph the victorious army of Edessa marched into Samosata. There they disarmed the Roman garrison, set Varro free, and put King Philip in honourable custody instead.

In the battle beside the ninth milestone seventy-nine Roman soldiers fell, sixteen Commagene soldiers, and twelve Edessa soldiers.

Nevertheless Nero's victory in the first attack made upon him by his enemies was regarded as a good sign all along the frontier. The Roman garrisons in Carrhae, Batnae and Palmyra let themselves be disarmed, or went over to Nero. Several towns supposed to be independent but in reality subject to Rome now acknowledged Nero and sent messages of thanksgiving to the Senate in Rome for the miraculous deliverance of the great Emperor.

CHAPTER XXX

THE REWARD OF PATIENCE

FRONTO presently realised with satisfaction that the hopes he had built on Marcia's marriage had been justified. Certain quite definite rumours had reached him from former friends of the potter Terence, which made it possible to assume with great probability that Terence was by no means a Nero in one point vital both for Marcia and for himself. If Fronto did not rush things and waited for the right moment he felt certain that his patience would be rewarded.

He took care to see Marcia as frequently as possible, but was never importunate; he remained gentlemanly, Roman, reserved, and showed his admiration for her by little delicate attentions without ever giving expression to his passion.

Marcia was still gnawed by the disappointments of her wedding night. She refused to speak to her father when he tried to sound her; the last remnants of her belief in him were gone. It was madness to think that a man like the slave Terence could ever rule on the Palatine. The man was as incapable of supporting the title of Emperor which people had thrust upon him as he was of living up to the name of Nero. Power and fame would remain as securely barred from her as love. She was lost,

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she was destined to vegetate for life in this horrible East.

Her thoughts and dreams circled more and more stubbornly round the only Roman of her acquaintance, Fronto. The fact that he kept his oath of allegiance to Titus and yet stayed on in Edessa filled her with pride ; she assumed that he was doing this for her sake, and she felt more closely drawn to him than ever. They were bound together by character and fate. He lived alone in the great empty Citadel, as she lived alone on her father's huge estate. She saw in the well-groomed man with the iron-grey hair, who represented the Roman army in the midst of five million hostile people, not a comic but a noble figure.

She fought against the temptation to throw herself at him. He saw her battle, calmly watched it, asked no question and waited. At last she could endure it no longer. "How can you bear it, my Fronto," she burst out one day—"the falseness of everything and everybody here, this empty and lying display? You are the only one of us who has kept his standards and not been demoralised by this awful country. Why don't you return to Antioch or Rome and breathe some pure air again after all this deceit and filth?"

Fronto looked at her. He saw her thin body nervously trembling under the robe of the Empress. He regarded her ardent brown eyes, the eyes of Varro. He was attracted by her purity, her Roman austerity, by the fact that she was her father's daughter and that she had found such a strange fate. He passionately desired her. But he must have patience, wait for the right moment. "I must wait," he thought, "until she begins to talk of Nero. I must keep myself in hand until then. As soon as she begins talking of Nero I can proceed. And after that I can go as far as I like."

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"I haven't really found, my Marcia," he replied, "that everything here is tinsel. The idea your father is fighting for was very real and by no means Utopian not so very long ago, indeed only fourteen years ago. If humanism and internationalism are no longer fashionable, if a narrow nationalism and a disgusting puritanism reign on the Palatine to-day, supporting themselves on naked military power, they aren't any the truer for being proclaimed there, and it proves nothing against our internationalism that we only dare utter it in Samosata. I don't know whether your father will achieve his aim by the risky path he has chosen; to be frank, I don't think he will. But if you reproach him for the unsavoury means which he employs to achieve it, then, my Marcia, you are doing him an injustice. His faith will triumph sometime, that is certain; but it's certain also that the people who will make that faith triumph will have to use just as stupid and filthy means as your father is using now."

The composure with which Fronto spoke, the generosity with which he defended her father, his fine classical Latin, his intelligent manly face and short iron-grey hair all pleased Marcia. She felt there was a strong bond between her and this man. She had no doubt that he was staying on in Edessa simply for her sake. But she wished to have it confirmed by his own lips. "What you say," she replied, "is all very fine and noble. But it isn't an answer to my question. Why do you stay on here? Why don't you go back to Rome?"

Fronto knew what she wanted him to say. He knew that she liked him, and he liked her very much. "I mustn't say too much," he told himself, "mustn't say either too much or too little. In any case it won't be a lie if I assure her that I am staying here for her sake. At this moment

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it is certainly true." "Why don't I go back to Rome?" he repeated her question, with an assumed air of hesitation. "I'll tell you quite frankly, my Marcia. Fate has planted your father and myself in opposite camps. But I respect your father and feel well-disposed to him. Perhaps I'll be able to help him in some ways if this business of his should come to grief." And in a cordial voice, but without putting too much passion into his words, he continued: "And in that case perhaps I could help you. I see no sense in letting oneself be made a martyr here in Mesopotamia, no sense either for you or for myself. I have kept open the possibility of returning to Roman territory if the worst comes to the worst. In that case would you go with me, my Marcia? Now you know why I am still here," he said with a slight smile, it sounded almost like an apology.

He was thinking: "Now she's bound to begin about her Nero and how unhappy she is with him. If she does that, then I'll sleep with her this very night."

Marcia said: "It's a great comfort to me that you are here, my Fronto. Perhaps it's weak of me to admit it, but it's unbearable to be alone here among all these loud-mouthed animals. Don't think badly of me if I can't keep silent. It isn't Roman, I know, but let me speak all the same. You can't picture what it means to be forced to live with such a despicable creature. This Nero——" and she went on to speak of him and of the way he had hung her wedding cloak over the back of the chair.

When she woke out of their first embraces she realised with astonishment that the dignified Roman Fronto talked of love and sex with the uttermost cynicism, not shrinking from the coarsest expressions. And she was still more astonished that she, who had

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once been educated as a Vestal, did not feel particularly shocked at him for that.

He was thinking: "It was wise of me to be patient. And it was honourable of me to stick to her and stay here. A curious place, this East. Here honour and bravery still find some reward."

CHAPTER XXXI

FRONTO'S TEMPTATION

ABSORBED in her love for Fronto, Marcia forgot to rage at her fate. She began to talk to her father again in a friendly way, and went over with him the prospects of their enterprise; though a certain shame prevented her from mentioning Fronto to him, and when he spoke of Fronto she remained silent. Even her hatred for Terence vanished. He became a stranger to her, a nobody, and she found no difficulty in answering him with languid politeness when he spoke to her.

More, there came a day when she actually began to have some liking for him. He begged her to go with him, and he would show her his favourite place, the labyrinth. She descended with him, escorted by a few torch-bearers. He led her into a remote chamber and told his men to remain outside, so that the room was only faintly lighted by their torches. They were alone in the dark cellar-like room, bats fluttered about, and she could see his face only in vague outline; but from the semi-darkness came the voice of Nero announcing his intention to turn the labyrinth into a burial chamber for himself and her. The gloomy impressiveness of the idea moved her; for the first time she felt her husband had some claim to the name that he bore.

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From that day she no longer felt any repulsion to him. If she had been offended at one time because he made no attempt to approach her as her husband, she now felt grateful instead. But she felt still more grateful because he had been the means of bringing her and Fronto together.

For his part Fronto went on making love to her and discovered that he was happy; but his happiness did not completely absorb him. He was passionately interested in politics and military art, a keen observer of the curious, moving and foolish doings of men; and the battle by the ninth milestone of the road from Samosata and its consequences excited his curiosity as an expert. Although Marcia, fearing the unnecessary risk, tried to hold him back, he proceeded to Samosata.

Varro had naturally heard of the relations between Fronto and his daughter and was glad that Marcia had found such an admirable lover. At Samosata he greeted Fronto with genuine warmth.

"Aren't you astonished, my Fronto," he began, "to see how quickly our Nero has regained his old power? The heavens are clearly on his side. He will win the hearts of everybody in a short time." "He probably will," Fronto admitted. "And I'm eager to see how long he will take to do it, how long an Emperor needs simply to show himself so as to become Emperor." "It will take no time," retorted Varro with conviction. "In questions of power where does appearance end and reality begin? It's a matter of pure indifference where a ruler draws the light that he sheds down upon his people. It's by no means always advisable that the light should come from himself. It's sometimes better to let it play upon him from a judicious angle. And Nero understands that now, just as he did twenty years ago." "You mean," replied Fronto, "that he's teachable

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and so can be used." "He was always teachable," replied Varro equivocally.

Fronto went on: "In any case the people behind him are skilful and courageous. They deserve the luck they have had up to now." Varro was secretly elated by such praise from an intelligent man. He stepped up to Fronto, held out his hand and said warmly: "Then why don't you too join those who are supporting Nero?"

When he set out for Samosata Fronto had hoped he would be asked to join Nero, he had played with the thought of angling for such an offer, and he had been waiting for it eagerly, if slightly apprehensively, resolved to refuse. But now that the offer had come it found him at a loss. His resolve wavered; usually so sure of himself, he hesitated, his mind a confusion.

For now he was being offered something for which he had longed all his life: the substance by means of which he could translate his theories into practice. He merely needed Roman soldiers and an enemy to fight, he merely needed a war or at least a battle. All these were his if he accepted. The man speaking to him, a clever, brave, likable man, his friend and the father of his mistress, was offering all this to him. True, the soldiers he could give him were not real Roman soldiers, they were mere auxiliary troops, as the army somewhat contemptuously termed them, contingents of barbarians with a slight sprinkling of small Roman formations. Yet even to work with such material was a great temptation.

Fronto was anything but a coward. But he was a Roman soldier, and certain principles of the Roman soldier were in his bones. As a Roman officer he comported himself haughtily. He loved the East, but a barbarian was a barbarian, and it would be beneath his dignity to fight on the side of barbarians against Romans, even

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if the barbarians were pursuing a policy useful to the Empire and the Romans one obnoxious to it. As a Roman soldier he had also learned to avoid needless danger. A Roman soldier on the march always withdrew behind his fortified camp when he halted, even if no surprise was to be feared. A soldier must secure himself; his claim to a pension and a secure old age was as necessary to him as the air he breathed.

So Fronto had now to fight very hard indeed with himself. It was an immense temptation to organise a new army and mould it to his will and wage a war with it; and this was certainly the last time in his life that he would be offered such a chance. On the other hand, if he decided for it he would have to give up the secure old age which he had earned by the work of a lifetime. A deep longing impelled him to try out his theories and prove them before the whole world, while the fundamental desire to stick to what he had held him back.

Varro observed his agitation. The fact that he was having such a hard battle made his friendship doubly valuable in Varro's eyes. He began urgently: "You know the chances and the risks as well as I do. We have thirty-five thousand men now, five thousand Roman soldiers among them. You know the value of such material. It isn't of the best, they're mostly contingents from the fourteenth legion and the fifth, but they're not too bad. Philip's cavalry, three thousand men, are picked troops. Take over the chief command of our army, my Fronto. Vespasian himself hadn't any better chances when he set out to fight Vitellius. And Vespasian's name had far less power than Nero's has."

Fronto said evasively: "What are you asking me to do? I'm a pen and ink officer, and I'm anything but popular." "You're much too clever," retorted Varro, "to be popular. But I'm quite satisfied if my Emperor

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is popular. I don't have any use for a popular commander, I prefer one who knows his business. You take over the army, my Fronto. We both love the East, you as much as I do. Come in with us, Fronto: say yes."

Fronto suddenly saw Marcia's eyes looking at him out of Varro's face. If he did not take over command there would be no choice for Varro but to hand it to Trebonius, that popular officer. Was he, by his shilly-shallying, to let the post fall into the hands of that fellow whom he could not bear, while he longed for it himself with all his heart? The temptation grew stronger. A little more and he would have held out his hand to Varro and said Yes, yes, yes. But he was restrained by his unwillingness to renounce his security, by the sleepless fear of danger instilled in him by his training. He withdrew into himself.

"Thanks, my Varro," he replied. "It isn't mere empty words if I say that your faith in me is a very high honour, and that I find it very difficult to decline your offer. But you see I am a soldier at bottom. I need my fifty-one per cent security. I like and respect you, I am attracted by your courage and your policy. But I won't give up my security for you. I can't promise you anything more than benevolent neutrality."

"I'm sorry, my Fronto," said Varro in a flat voice, "that you can't come in with us." "I'm sorry too," replied Fronto. They were sitting in one of the beautiful apartments of the King's palace in Samosata, but their postures were those of exhausted men and they stared in front of them. "Do you intend to call on King Philip?" Varro asked after a while, desperately trying to find another subject. "How could I?" replied Fronto. "I'm a Roman officer, I can only meet that rebel as an enemy. I have come here to consult with Trebonius. Actually I should not have seen you, my Varro." "I am afraid,"

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said Varro sadly, "now that you have decided not to join us, you'll have to return to Antioch soon in spite of all your cleverness." But Fronto woke up at that. "I have no intention of doing so," he declared. "My zeal for your cause will inspire me and make me think of arguments for staying on. So long as your business has the slightest spark of hope I'll remain here. I'm your friend, Varro. Please believe that."

"Thanks," replied Varro. They had seen many people and many things, they had grown used to distrust all words, whether spoken by others or by themselves; but this time they felt they meant honestly by each other.

"Who is to have the command, since you decline it?" Varro wondered aloud to himself. "Trebonius, of course," Fronto replied. "I probably dislike the fellow even more deeply than you do. And he can't bear me, and when he's in authority he'll be a nuisance to me, but as things stand now he is your man. As a soldier, a counsellor and your friend I advise you to appoint Trebonius."

CHAPTER XXXII

TWIN SOULS

A FEW days after the foregoing conversation Nero moved in state from Edessa to Samosata. He delivered King Philip from his honourable captivity, embraced him and called him brother. Then, after a long consultation with Varro, he summoned Trebonius to his audience chamber.

That popular officer had gone through several disagreeable hours in the last few days. When Fronto popped up in Samosata Trebonius was flung into a panic. What was the intriguer doing here? It was he, Trebonius, who had saved the Emperor Nero: was this other fellow going to snatch the reward from under his nose now, simply because he belonged to the aristocracy and enjoyed higher military rank? These few days with their tension and their prospects of new and more violent times had finally disgusted him with the dry repitance of the garrison. He felt awakening anew the ardour of the for adventure which he had known in postures were those dreamed of marching into the far East in front of them. "Does Nero, or perhaps even into the West, Varro asked after a startled Alexander, were to command another subject. "How can I participate in these grand doings as commander-in-chief; that was I have come here to confirm this was no mere dream, that at I should not have seen your conscious rival, Fronto. He had been

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somewhat reassured, however, when Fronto paid a call on him and showed clearly that he still considered himself one of Titus's officers, nothing more. But perhaps that was a mere stratagem, since he, Trebonius, had not yet declared himself. After that visit he had actually thought for a moment of openly joining Nero and having the fine Fronto arrested straight away as an enemy of the state and a spy of the usurper Titus. But his sense of discipline immediately made itself felt, the respect of an inferior officer for his assured and cultivated superior; and he could not bring himself to proceed against Fronto in such a direct and crude manner.

Now that Nero sent for him first of all, he was uplifted with joy after his doubts and hesitations. He felt they were going to give him at last the position he deserved. And immediately his tormenting doubts vanished and were replaced by a brazen insolence. Oh yes, he was perfectly prepared to come to terms with this man from Edessa. But he also knew his own worth, and he would make this Nero feel that he was not to be sneezed at, that he was the celebrated Trebonius, while in spite of his Imperial purple the other was only the slave Terence.

So he appeared boldly, decked out in his countless decorations, blatantly sure of himself. Nero was sitting in a chair when the Captain clattered in. It was a chair like any other chair, and except for the wide purple stripe of the Emperor, Nero was dressed with the utmost simplicity. Yet as he lolled there with his proud and slightly bored air, watching the man coming towards him, he was every inch an Emperor. He sat on the chair as on a throne, and Trebonius was profoundly impressed by his dignity. So when he raised his arm in the salute reserved for Emperors, it was more than an empty gesture. Brought up in the barrack and the camp, he

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felt at once that the man sitting on that chair possessed the natural attributes of power, and as a soldier he automatically responded. Yet at the same time he knew that this man was not the real Emperor; and the very fact that he was not the Emperor and yet sat there so imperially impressed him more than ever. He felt for this man the soldier's obsequious and impudent comprehension: the voluntary submission of a bandit to his chieftain.

The man sitting on the chair guessed at once that this was a true friend and admirer. Terence felt the yearning envy of a little man towards men greater than himself, but he was really at home only with his equals. So he was immediately drawn to Trebonius. He felt he had found a twin soul in the darling of the army, the popular Trebonius. He was grateful to Varro for having chosen this man as the commander of his army.

Trebonius had entered intending to greet Terence with cheerful brutality, and indicate that his services were not to be bought cheaply. But the man who sat there staring at him superciliously through his emerald was not the potter Terence. And when the man announced that he appointed him general and henceforth entrusted him with the supreme command of the army, Trebonius felt humbly uplifted, undeservedly singled out, as if it were the real Nero in full possession of an Emperor's powers who was granting him that great honour. He was filled with joy to think that he had been chosen to win an Empire for this man and lay it at his feet. The man in the chair, still scrutinising him haughtily and somewhat wearily through the emerald, impressed him as he had never been impressed since the susceptible days of his youth.

It was the happiest moment of his life when he lined up his soldiers to swear the oath of allegiance to Nero,

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and substituted for the effigy of Titus on the standards and colours that of his new master. He gave thanks to the gods in his heart, and vowed that, though as commander-in-chief he need not distinguish himself personally, he would be the first to scale the walls of the next city they besieged, even if it cost him his life; he would plant on those walls the effigy of this man and so gain at last the mural crown.

CHAPTER XXXIII

HIGH POLITICS

THE guard before the door of the library which served Nero as a council chamber saluted and let Knops pass. Knops, once a slave, now Secretary of State, observed with annoyance that he was the first to arrive. This confounded punctuality was still in his bones, a survival from the time when he had been a slave. The fine gentlemen, his colleagues, never seemed to be in a hurry.

The active Knops could not sit still. He wandered along the cabinets in which the books and rolls were kept, fingered the fine wood and the bronze of the statues, and mechanically priced them in his mind. Gradually his bad humour faded. Shouldn't he be glad to feel so much at home in King Philip's palace?

The slave Knops had climbed high. He hugged himself to think that he had so obstinately believed in Terence's rise and stuck to him. He would go on sticking to him. He honestly liked Nero, if only because Nero had given him a chance to prove his abilities. For the rest, he looked upon him as a fool and loved him all the more because he felt so superior to him.

He, Knops, had a head on his shoulders and had seen lots of things in his life. If he were a little less clever he would proceed to Antioch now and witness against Nero-Terence, for he had lots of material to go on. If

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he did that, no doubt Cejonius would confirm his manumission and give him a considerable sum of money. A simpler fellow might think it better to live as a free man under Titus than to be Secretary of State under Nero. And in his heart of hearts Knops was convinced that the mad adventure of this potter must end in disaster. But as he had a head on his shoulders he could see past that. The same inner voice which had told him not to leave Terence when things were going badly with him, told him now that Nero would climb higher yet and that a great deal could still be got out of him. So Knops went on playing his game and playing it so well that sometimes he himself could hardly tell whether the man was Nero or Terence. But deep in his heart he was always on the watch. He had a good nose, he would manage to know in time when the end was drawing near, and he would take good care to clear out at the right moment.

He walked about the beautiful room, taking out a roll or a book now and then, and he felt in the best of spirits. Grinning good-humouredly, he thought of his friend Gorion. He had taught that fool a lesson; but he was still fond of Gorion. He had sold him the factory in the Red Street at a fairly high figure and helped him in various other ways. Little Jalta, Gorion's daughter, was fourteen now, in her prime. Perhaps he would marry her after all, as he had promised Gorion; he felt on such good terms with the world that he could afford even that. In any case he would sleep with the girl sometime when he found time. And old Gorion would have to thank him for it too.

His pleasant fantasies were interrupted by the entrance of Trebonius. Trebonius was wearing the purple stripe and the red high-heeled buskin of the senator. He obviously did not feel quite at home still in his

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new attire, and Knops told himself that he looked like a pig in a deerskin. Trebonius could feel Knops's disrespectful attitude. He had both liked and disliked the impudent slave from the first. But, as the fellow seemed to have considerable influence with the Emperor, he had decided to remain friends with him, but at the same time always to be on his guard.

Trebonius seated himself comfortably, while Knops wandered restlessly up and down. The evening before they had got uproariously drunk together in a tavern and been like ducks in water. While they were waiting for the others to come Knops drew a picture of how he and Trebonius would enjoy themselves in Daphne after Antioch fell. Trebonius gloated lingeringly over the facetious tortures they would inflict on Cejonius and his followers, and Knops underlined his lewd fancies. "You really have a head on your shoulders, my Knops," said Trebonius appreciatively, with a loud laugh. But he pronounced Knops with the short o and the compliment was spoiled for the Secretary of State.

As soon as King Philip and the Senator Varro entered, however, Knops's annoyance vanished and he was immediately at one with Trebonius against the other two. In the course of a few days the four men who formed the immediate entourage of Nero had split into two parties. On the one side stood the two aristocrats, Varro and King Philip; they represented that liberal cosmopolitanism which had always been associated with Nero. Trebonius and Knops, on the other hand, held that they stood for the people, the millions who acclaimed the Emperor now as they had acclaimed him before, because he was every inch an Emperor and yet entered into their ways, because he was so shameless, so evil, so vainglorious, so histrionic, so unique, because he never hesitated to put himself on a level with them and show

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off his art to them, because he had cruelly executed thousands, preferring men of the highest nobility as his victims to men of the people, and because he was the last heir of the house of the great Julius Caesar.

King Philip and Varro were dressed simply and yet seemed quite at home in the fine room. Knops himself showed a certain moderation in his dress. He was annoyed with Trebonius for having fobbed himself up like a parvenu ; but in spite of that he was defiantly resolved to stick by him.

Terence entered. He entered with the slack, somewhat weary tread of Nero, perfunctorily embraced the four men, took his seat, and without ceremony asked his advisers to speak to the point. He had quickly learned to comport himself everywhere as the most important person present, with the casual politeness of a man accustomed from his youth to pre-eminence. Nevertheless, both Varro and Knops knew that he thirsted for recognition as a dry field for rain. Varro was secretly amused by the friendly, courteous and yet faintly imperious tone in which Nero requested him to report on the present situation. Yet he had to allow that the man hit the right note.

Varro made his report as requested. For the time being everything was going well. Their treasury was full. The Imperial domains were contributing liberally, the Mesopotamian princes had been generous. Trade was suffering, certainly ; the Roman customs-house officials were intriguing against them. Already some of the richer merchants were contemplating changing their trade routes.

Nero listened without showing much interest, exactly as Nero had listened to his minister's reports, or so he had been told. He now leant his head on his hand and said lazily : "Thanks, my Varro. And what lines do you suggest for our policy during the next few weeks?"

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Varro replied: "Until King Artaban comes to our assistance with troops and money I consider it expedient to avoid all provocation, whether external or internal. So long as we give no provocation the Governor Cejonius will not dare to proceed against us. I therefore urgently recommend that our army confine itself to preserving what it has won, and refuse to risk new battles. As regards our inner policy, I counsel that no further attempt should be made to stir up the populace. When Your Majesty took over power there were certain painful incidents. Opponents of the Emperor were ill-treated or murdered, and their property stolen. What is past is past, but in future we must not wantonly butcher enemies of the Emperor, but rather bring them to justice. Nero was always mild and just, and he should remain so."

These words of Varro were obviously aimed at Knops. For in the first joy of victory Knops had avenged himself on his personal enemies and rivals, had put some to torture, killed others, and confiscated the property of a considerable number. Intelligent as he was, he saw that he had gone too far and he had resolved to exercise moderation in future. But he did not want that moderation to be imposed upon him by Varro; he wished himself to have the credit for it. So he replied to the Senator somewhat sharply. He began by making some reflections on the nature of power, how to seize it and how to keep it. The surest means, he went on, to maintain oneself in power was to play off the well-disposed part of the population against the ill-disposed. They must support the adherents of the Emperor with all the means at their disposal, and ruthlessly fight his enemies. "I admit," he declared, "having destroyed some of these enemies and I am proud of the fact, in spite of the scruples expressed by the noble Senator. And in certain circumstances I would not shrink from terroristic measures

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again. If the Emperor manifests his power in all its might, that will distract the minds of the masses from those wretched economic worries of which the noble Senator has spoken."

King Philip cut a grimace, as if Knops's words made him physically sick. He said: "There are not many enemies of the Emperor here in the East, and they are so weak that there is no need of a reign of terror to daunt them. It seems to me that the Emperor's power will be best advanced by preaching and disseminating his noble idea, the idea of the union of the East and the West." But while he spoke he never even glanced at Knops; instead he gazed straight in front of him with raised brows, very haughtily.

Trebonius had been deeply offended by Varro's outline of military policy and now he turned his impudent, almost lashless eyes on King Philip. "I agree with the Secretary of State," he said in his grating voice, "I don't consider waiting to be the best method of establishing the power of the Emperor. Power means attack. Power means capturing towns, killing and looting. The fasces and the axe, that's what power means. We must burst into Roman Syria and take Antioch. If we don't shilly-shally, if we attack now, if we march out to-morrow, we can still probably manage it. And you'll see then, gentlemen, how quickly good old Artaban will make up his mind to support us." He spoke in the voice which he had found by experience to work on his soldiers. His decorations rattled, his face radiated power and confidence. From Knops's expression it could be seen that he was in enthusiastic agreement, and Nero himself listened with visible pleasure. But the two aristocrats, Varro and King Philip, did not seem to be attending; Varro rummaged among his papers, Philip gazed at his hands. An uncomfortable silence ensued.

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Nero saw that it was now time for him to intervene. These questions themselves did not interest him. The whole business of ruling did not interest him; all that interested him was playing at being an emperor. But with his sound instinct he divined what he had to do. He must make some impressive pronouncement, but he must not agree with either party. So in spite of Varro he raised the emerald to his eye and gazed at the four men, one after the other. "You have all right on your side, my good and faithful councillors," he decided finally, and then quoted Euripides, "Force at the right time and justice at the right time, that is what makes the good ruler." Nevertheless, even while he uttered this quotation, he was regretting that that particular verse should have come to his mind; for it contained four th's. On the other hand the lines were a good basis for a further pronouncement. "You, my Trebonius," he declared, "and you, my Knops, have displayed force at the right time. But when the Senator Varro and King Philip maintain that the time has now come for mildness and justice, they are also in the right. I thank you all."

And Nero himself would have behaved in exactly the same way. Once he had asked his counsellors to suggest the main lines of a policy, he left them to do the work and contented himself with playing them off against each other; and he always told them that they had right on their side. And now the new Nero was doing the same thing, and with impressive naturalness, too.

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complete as quickly as possible the negotiations with the King of Parthia. Knops would attend to the finances in Edessa in collaboration with himself and the High Priest Sharbil.

Knops and Trebonius angrily watched the unconcealed efforts of these aristocrats to push them aside. Nero gave a weary shrug; clearly he hadn't been listening very carefully. "Splendid, my Varro," he contented himself with saying, "excellent. Bring me the necessary documents and I shall sign them. We have advanced," he said in conclusion, "a good way in this session; we have established the main lines of our policy." He woke up. "Keep these main lines before you. We wish always to show both force and justice if possible. But if that is not possible, then justice at one time and force at another. I hope no differences of opinion will arise regarding which quality is called for at any time. But if a difference should arise, then the gods will give me wisdom to decide which method is the right one."

With that he dismissed his counsellors. All four were quite taken aback by the adroitness with which the man allowed right to all of them and to none of them.

CHAPTER XXXIV

THE FABRICATION OF AN EMPEROR

THE wily Parthian king Artaban still hesitated to recognise Nero. In his letters he availed himself of the usual flowery Eastern circumlocutions to avoid any decision. Mallukh's and Varro's agents sat about in the ante-chambers of the Parthian ministers. But the utmost length to which Artaban would go was the sending of a caravan with precious gifts, perfumes and spices, accompanied by the equivocal message: "For the man who is called the Emperor Nero." That could be interpreted either as recognition or as non-recognition. Yet it was of enormous importance for Nero that the King should come to a decision. If he did not intervene soon on Nero's side, they would not be able to hold out either militarily or financially. The whole East had certainly breathed freely when they beheld once more the eagles of the Emperor; but if Artaban did not provide food for it, all that that eagle could do was to fly away or fall into a decline.

Varro's agents worked feverishly, goaded on by him. But the Parthian ministers remained difficult, ceremonious and maddeningly lethargic. At last, after two months, Varro received a definite answer.

The King of Kings, Artaban's Chancellor informed him, was prepared to put at the disposal of his friend the Roman

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Emperor thirty thousand men, among them six thousand cavalry consisting of picked troops. Also he would guarantee a loan of two hundred million sesterces. But on the condition that the Emperor Nero should be recognised not only by Mesopotamia but also by the population of Roman Syria. When a sufficient number of fortified towns on Roman territory, towns beyond the Euphrates, went over to Nero and he had firm possession of them, Artaban would send him the money and the troops.

When Varro read the Parthian King's conditions for the first time he was radiant ; he found them moderate and reasonable. But the longer he reflected on them, the more difficult they seemed to fulfil. Of course, as that idiot Trebonius suggested, one could fall on Roman Syria and take a few frontier towns. But that would be madness. After such provocation Cejonius would be able to cross the Euphrates with good reason and the approval of the Palatine, and smash Nero without any risk of causing a Parthian war, for if the Romans could appear as the defending force instead of the attacking one Artaban would never get Parthia to declare war against them. No, it couldn't be done so simply as that fellow Trebonius imagined. The Roman towns must go over to Nero of their own free will. And that was also clearly the meaning of the condition which the wily Artaban had made.

Now several of the Roman frontier towns had had money lavished on them to induce them to come over. But they all hesitated. They lacked a proper pretext for deserting the government of Antioch, and Cejonius took care not to provide them with one. Varro racked his brains. How could these towns be stimulated ? How could they be brought to the point of rebelling against the Roman Governor ? Varro had succeeded in bringing Nero the whole region between the Euphrates and the Tigris, as well as Commagene. Was the great

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enterprise to shipwreck now on this absurdly trivial matter of getting a few Roman frontier towns to come over? The thought so tormented him that he lost his sleep. Precious time was passing. He could think of nothing.

Knops appeared one day. His quick eyes darted over the Senator's furrowed face. Could he be gloating on Varro's helplessness? If so, he let no sign of it be seen. "The Parthian conditions appear moderate but are hard," he said bluntly. "Quite right, my lad," Varro jeered. "We must think about this," Knops went on. "Do so, my dear Knops," replied Varro. "I have done so," Knops continued; "I have an idea." "I am listening," Varro said politely but without hope, smiling.

The sceptical smile soon faded from his face. The idea that Knops had hatched out was brazen in its villainy, but logical in spite of its extravagance, and with every promise of success. "The people have a fertile imagination," Varro decided, while he listened to the cheerfully babbling Knops with loathing and admiration.

Knops's plan was as follows: To induce the frontier population of Roman Syria to desert Cejonius and go over to the rightful Emperor Nero, only a public pretext understandable to everybody was needed; for the population were prepared in spirit. The only problem, indeed, was to make the most of a pretext that already existed, and draw everybody's attention to it. That would not be difficult. For instance, there were along the Syrian border countless followers of the god who called himself Christ, and it was known that these so-called Christians fanatically hated the rightful Emperor Nero. For hadn't they sixteen years before set Rome on fire out of pure, criminal hatred and fanaticism? It was highly probable, more, it was certain, that they were now hatching some blasphemous plan of a similar kind, supported by Cejonius, who wished to destroy all the people in Syria who still remained true

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to Nero. Anyone who knew the mentality of these Christians, and the vengeful spirit of the usurper Titus and his servants, could easily picture what direction the criminal plans of the Christians and their instigators would take. It was obvious, for instance, that these fanatics might easily open the sluices of the Euphrates or the Euphrates canals, or otherwise damage them, and flood and destroy some Roman Syrian frontier town secretly devoted to Nero. And wasn't it as good as certain that if such a crime were to happen the whole frontier population would rise as one man against the Government in Antioch? After that, supported by the native population, Nero could easily maintain himself for a few months in the frontier towns that went over to him, Artaban's conditions would be fulfilled, and Nero would receive the promised troops and the promised money.

Varro stared fixedly at Knops, who went on talking calmly as if he were making arrangements for a picnic. The fellow was quite right. This plan of his was a real discovery, an idea worth considering. In its dumbfounding simplicity it was both sublime and absurd. It was bound to succeed. It was bound to call forth the desired response from the people. Knops had no need to point that out to Varro.

Nobody knew who had really set Rome on fire sixteen years before. Varro had good reason to believe that it was certain speculators in property. The aristocratic Republican party hostile to Nero had maintained that the Emperor himself started the fire out of sheer delight in destruction and to feed his eyes on such a wonderful spectacle. The people themselves were divided in opinion. Many considered the Emperor to be the originator of the fire; but they admired Nero more than they hated him for a crime on such a sublime scale. Yet the majority were convinced that the fire was kindled by the Christians

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who were accused of it by Nero: he had to find some scapegoat. However that might be, if a Roman Syrian town were destroyed now by such a plot, Knops was quite right in asserting that the people would react at once by associating the business with Nero. They would regard the deed as in some way Neronian; the belief that Nero was alive and in Samosata would become a firm conviction. After that one could easily convince the people, who hadn't much gift for logic, that these fanatical Christians, instigated by Titus's spies, had released the waters as sixteen years before they had kindled the flame. It was of course absurd to imagine that Cejonius's people would destroy a town in their own territory out of mere spite against the Syrians. But simply because it was so absurd it had every prospect of being credited by the people. And the people would rejoice if Nero a second time pushed the blame on to the Christians and thus smashed them.

"An abominable plan," Varro told himself, "a plan calculated with absolute exactitude to work on the souls of the people. What a dreadful imagination the people have," he thought. Aloud he said: "Aren't you laying it on a little bit thick, my dear Knops?" "Of course I am laying it on thick, my Varro," retorted Knops, and Varro gave a slight start when he heard the man addressing him so familiarly. Knops went on: "But that is the very point of the business, to lay it on thick. The more outrageous a lie is, the more certain it is to be believed," he concluded with deep conviction.

In his heart Varro agreed with him. "And where, my Knops," he asked, and the "my Knops" filled the Secretary of State with enormous pride. "And where in your opinion would such a flood be most effective?" "Anywhere you like," replied Knops with assurance. "All along the Euphrates there are canals, sluices and weirs;

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Nero has friends everywhere ; Titus has officials everywhere, Christians, contingents of the fourteenth legion ; you can find Syrian shrines everywhere whose destruction would enrage the population ; levers everywhere to regulate the level of the Euphrates and its canals ; enthusiasm everywhere ; lack of judgment everywhere, and hands everywhere to turn these levers and open these sluices. Take Byrrha, for instance, or Apamea, or Europos, or Dagusa. Any of these towns would rise against the Christians if their houses were swept away. And anybody who appeared after the flood, appeared at the right moment, would be greeted as a saviour. And if the saviour should be called the Emperor Nero——” He did not finish his sentence but contented himself with a faint, ironical smile.

Knops's project was taken up at once by the other counsellors of the Emperor. Trebonius was especially delighted with the idea. But King Philip looked somewhat troubled when he heard of the plan. And King Mallukh suddenly discovered that he had had enough of the business of ruling and vanished on one of his excursions into the distant wilderness ; he set out quietly and inconspicuously with only a small escort. The High Priest Sharbil was most troubled of all. He had the not unreasonable suspicion that these Christians might select a temple of the goddess Tarate for their criminal purposes ; and indeed, it appeared that they were actually thinking of her ancient shrine in the town of Apamea. His conscience awoke. The temple of Tarate in Apamea was situated beside the oldest fish pool of the goddess, a great stretch of water fed by the river ; and consequently it lay somewhat low, and was bound to be destroyed in an inundation of the town. Could he leave the precious shrine to its fate, without warning ? But Sharbil told himself that, taking a wide view, the conse-

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quences could only be favourable to the goddess ; for under Nero she could be worshipped in a much more whole-hearted way than under Titus. Besides, Sharbil was inquisitive and very old and had never yet seen a temple of Tarate destroyed by a flood. Also—and this was perhaps what decided him—a voice whispered to him, a voice to which he scarcely dared to listen, that it would be all to the good if the popular shrine in Apamea were put out of action for some time ; it must swell the stream of pilgrims to his own temple in Edessa. For many years the High Priest Sharbil had been accredited with prophetic powers. Now he began to foretell dark happenings, floods and suchlike occurrences calculated deeply to offend his goddess ; he claimed that the movements of the sacred fish and the entrails of the living sacrifices boded evil things.

Meanwhile Trebonius and Knops diligently set about executing their plan. Trebonius looked after the technical side, Knops prepared the minds of the population. Trebonius was almost as proud as Knops himself that Knops had hit on the saving idea, after these supercilious nobles had failed and did not know where to turn. Night and day Trebonius dreamt that he would be the first to scale the walls of the drowning town of Apamea and thus win the mural crown, the one decoration he still lacked.

The Emperor was merely given a vague hint that his popularity was increasing, and that a great and fortunate event was presently going to happen. All that was required of him was that he should show himself in the flooded town at the right moment. If he knew nothing, his indignation at such a despicable crime would be bound to appear all the more convincing.

CHAPTER XXXV

THE GREAT CRIME

THE bounds of the town of Apamea extended across both banks of the Euphrates. On the right bank rose Seleukia, the new town, on a little hill crowned by a citadel. The old town lay on level ground on the left bank. Here was Tarate's oldest fish pool which had played such a decisive part in *Sharbil's deliberations* ; it was a sort of backwater of the Euphrates, and beside it stood the ancient, sacred, quite small temple of the goddess. The two parts of the town were connected by a bridge of boats. The citizens of the old town were pure Syrian, and those of the new town Syrian for the most part ; the town was guarded by a strong Roman garrison.

A little above Apamea the great canal of Gorbates began : it served to irrigate the whole neighbourhood. The level of the canal and the river itself had been regulated since time immemorial by sluices and water-gates which were said to have been built by the legendary Queen Semiramis ; they were now called the sluices of Gorbates and were universally admired as miracles of technical skill. Skilled workmen guarded the delicate and yet simple mechanism of these sluices ; in living memory no serious accident had happened to them.

So the population of the old town of Apamea were all

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the more terrified when one April night the Euphrates suddenly burst into their streets and houses and inundated them. Before they had time to turn the old town was a single, yellow, softly billowing lake. The pool of Tarate, cut off from the Euphrates from time immemorial, was now part of it ; the sacred fishes were swept away, and all but the roof of the temple vanished in the swirling flood. On the lake which was now the town of Apamea hastily manned boats plied, and furniture, cattle and the first dead began to float down the stream. Across the waters came the terrified cries of trapped people, the lowing and bleating of cattle. Rafts, nailed together with ox hides, and occupied by naked or half-naked people, oared their way through streets which the day before had been filled with litters, men on horse-back and vehicles of all kinds.

Nobody could understand how the catastrophe had happened. Not till several hours later did they find one of the watchmen farther down the banks of the Euphrates ; he was bound and gagged. When he was set free, half-dead with terror and exhaustion, he related that one of his superiors had suddenly set upon him along with several men he did not know ; they had overpowered him, bound him, and flung him into the river ; what happened after that he did not know, it was a miracle that he had reached the bank in safety and been found. The official who had attacked him and opened the sluice, in a fit of madness or out of sheer spite, had been a certain Simlai, a Christian.

Just as quickly as the flood had spread in the low-lying old town a few hours before, there now spread in the new town the news that the flood had been let loose by these vile sectarians. The Christian Simlai had already confessed that he had been bribed to open the sluices by the Government scribe Ariston. The whole population

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was in a state of fury. Before midday next day it was conclusively proved that the Christians, these dregs of humanity, had been bribed by supporters of the usurper Titus to destroy the shrine of the goddess of Syria and her beautiful town, simply because the Syrians wished to desert Titus and return to their rightful Emperor Nero.

All the world knew that the Christians were revolutionaries. Enemies of the family and of property, they were capable of any crime. The people of Apamea fell upon them, rushed into their houses, killed every one they found and smashed the furniture.

The Roman soldiers obviously sympathised with the people. They worked hard to save the town ; on boats and rafts they rowed the survivors across to the right bank, saved what could be saved, and toiled like slaves to repair the bridge of boats, which had been damaged when the flood burst. Those who remained behind in the Citadel, so as to secure the right bank of the river, stood on the bastions and watch-towers and stared down at the waters. Yesterday their citadel had stood on the bank of a river ; to-day it looked over a huge lake. That yellowish expanse looked strange under the blue sky scattered with white spring clouds. The tops of the houses rose grotesquely from the water. Herons stood on one leg, dignified and absurd, on the roof-tops, and between the yellow waters and the bright sky flew flocks of chattering water birds. More and more boats and rafts appeared among the house-roofs, manned with men eager to help or to pillage, with destitute families and riff-raff. But the temple of Tarate itself looked strangest of all. The soldiers could look straight down into its uncovered shrine. The obscene symbol of the goddess, the tall statue of the phallus, still rose out of the water. But her immemorial hideous bronze image, which stood in a niche

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above the altar, was covered up to the shoulders ; and from the water rose her head with the mural crown and one hand holding a spindle, while all round her floated splinters of wood and all sorts of sacred rubbish. The goddess looked strange and menacing, and when one of the soldiers, joking, said that her fish tail should come in handy now, the others did not laugh.

But who could these men be, coming from the north in long boats ? They were wearing Roman uniforms and weapons ; they must be comrades and friends. Yes, it was their comrades from the other detachments of the fourteenth legion, arrived at last from Edessa and Samosata. It must be the great Trebonius himself with his men. A thousand times they had asked themselves eagerly, hopefully, apprehensively : Would he come ? Would he come soon ? Would he risk it ? And what would he do when he did come ? Must they fight him, or should they open the gates to him ?

And now he was there. He had come with the great flood. What a short time he and his men had taken to cover such a huge distance. His engineers joined the engineers of the garrison without further parley and began to repair the bridge. Laughing and gesticulating, Trebonius stood looking on, shouting at them, cursing them, driving them on. The boat-bridge was the only approach to the citadel.

Now they seemed to have almost finished ; the bridge was lengthening, it still bent with the stream, it bobbed up and down uneasily, but it held. And now, stout and daring Trebonius, the darling of the army, the great hero, boldly rode on to it on his horse Victor and prepared to cross ; he, the first of them all.

He rode in front, well before his men. He had no need for caution ; his shield hung idly by his side. With their batteries they could easily have mown him and his men

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down. And he would drown helplessly in his armour. Now they did not even need their batteries, they could reach him with their arrows, even a well-flung spear would settle his hash for him. He calmly rode over the groaning planks spanning the yellow waters; his decorations glittered on his breast in the bright spring sunlight.

Now he and his men had reached the end of the bridge immediately underneath the great gate of the fortress, which alone barred their way. What were the soldiers in the citadel to do? They still had time, they still had a minute or two in which to decide. Should they obey their orders and hurl down stones on the enemy, the huge, heavy stones which always lay ready at hand? Or should they pour down pitch and boiling oil on him? The officer in command, instead of deciding, turned irresolutely to his men. They tempestuously begged him to open the gate and admit the great Trebonius.

But that was not according to Trebonius's plan. He did not want to enter tamely through the gate. He was resolved to conquer the town and scale its walls. The men standing on the bastion gaped. Trebonius had ordered his men to raise their shields over their heads until they formed a sort of roof. That wasn't easy on the swaying boat-bridge; it required some skill, no doubt about it. And now, by Hercules, he was swinging himself in his heavy armour on to the upraised shields of the last rank; he certainly wasn't lacking in pluck. Gasping and panting, he staggered clumsily forward over the clattering, tottering shields. The scaling ladder was handed up to him. He put it against the wall and began to climb.

On the bastion above, the men stood helpless and irresolute round their young officer. A few of them seized stones and prepared to hurl them down. But when

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they saw their comrades waving, shouting and cheering on the great Trebonius, they drew back again. And Trebonius was certainly a marvellous sight. He climbed step by step. Everything below him reeled, the boat-bridge, the men standing on it with their shields forming a roof, the ladder itself, all reeled, but he did not fall, he kept his balance. He climbed and climbed, laughing and panting. He shouted out the old battle cry of his legion, "For Mars and the fourteenth." He went on climbing, and at last put his hand on the top of the wall and swung himself up. There he stood. "Here we are, lads," he said in his rude native Dalmatian dialect, and he laughed his famous laugh.

Nobody considered at that moment that this whole performance was quite superfluous, and that Trebonius could have entered the citadel much more safely, indeed without any risk to himself, through the gate. The soldiers cheered him wildly, the whole town of Apamea cheered the Emperor Nero's servant, the great General Trebonius, who had risen from the flood to save them from further disaster. Without waiting for orders the soldiers of the garrison tore the effigy of Titus from their standards and substituted the effigy of Nero which their comrades had brought with them. The young officer congratulated Trebonius, and said he was now sure to receive the mural crown which he had so often earned before: this heroic deed achieved before the eyes of all Apamea made that practically certain. It was a great moment. The figure of Trebonius was impressed for ever on their minds as he ascended from the flood and climbed over the shields and up the scaling ladder to the top of the citadel of Apamea, an embodiment of the soldier's motto to "live dangerously".

Three hours later the Secretary of State Knops appeared in Apamea. In the market-place of the un-

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harmed new town he made a speech. "The great day has dawned," he announced. "The time for such crimes is over. The Emperor Nero will see to it that his faithful subjects are protected in future from the dastardly crimes of the creatures of the usurper Titus."

CHAPTER XXXVI

THE SINGER OF THE GREAT FLOOD

THE Emperor himself arrived towards evening and was wildly cheered by the troops and the people. After he had hastily washed he ascended with Varro, Trebonius, Knops and some others to the tower of the citadel. The tower was in eight flights, narrowing as it rose, and every floor had a separate gallery. From the top the Emperor contemplated the old town of Apamea sinking in the flood. His attendants described to him the extent of the disaster, pointed out the most important buildings, and reported the means they had employed to save what could be saved.

After a while the Emperor dismissed his attendants. They waited in the next gallery. He desired to be left by himself. He hoped, he explained, that the spectacle of the sinking city might inspire him, so that he might add some lines to the song of the great flood, the flood of Deucalion, in his verse romance concerning the four ages of the world.

He stood alone at the top of the tower. Below him in the other galleries were stationed his courtiers and soldiers. At the foot of the tower a great crowd was assembled, and from the boats and rafts plying across the yellow waters thousands of eyes gazed up at him curiously

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and reverently. But standing there he was gloating over the terrible and uplifting spectacle of the inundated town.

Nobody had informed him how the flood had come about ; but his inner voice, his daimon, assured him beyond shadow of doubt that this mighty deluge had not come by chance, but had been released to his greater glory. His heart rose. That day in the Senate in Rome had been the greatest in his life, but this was a greater one. This town of Apamea had perished for him, and the multitude standing reverently at his feet greeted him as their saviour and redeemer. Against all expectation his mother's dream and his own dreams had come true.

He began to recite to himself lines from the epic of the great flood. He had studied this work of Nero very carefully and made it his own. Gazing down at Apamea he sang verses from it, verses about the iron age, which had been destroyed by water at the bidding of Zeus. He sang them into the clear distance, into the darkening evening sky, while water birds screamed round him ; and as he sang them he played on an invisible harp.

The people standing at the foot of the tower and on the rafts and boats stared up at him. Here in the East they had always hoped that he would sometime display his art to them as he had done to the Romans, Corinthians and Athenians. And now he was actually doing so. Their Emperor was standing up there gazing at the ruined town, he the singer, the saviour, listening to the voice of his genius and letting his countenance shine upon them. They stared up at him in awed reverence.

And he, gazing down at the flood, while the evening breeze stirred his hair, sang to his imaginary harp. As Nero's familiar lines fell from his lips he fell into in a dream. He would rebuild this ruined city, and far more gloriously ; he would call it Neronias ; had he not once rebuilt Rome itself with magical speed and in great

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splendour? He would cover this country with superb buildings and fine works of art. He remembered the night in the temple of Tarate and resolved again that he would have his statue hewn out of the rocks of Edessa after the style of the Eastern kings, so that his face might remain inscribed on the mountains for eternity. Yet while he thought all this he could not refrain from calculating what the carving of such a huge relief would cost, and in his heart he regretted that Knops was not there, for Knops could have given him a rough estimate. In spite of himself he recalled that statue of Mithras which the carpet-manufacturer had rejected because the estimate had been exceeded too extravagantly.

But no sign of such low thoughts could be seen on his face. He went on singing, high on his tower under the evening sky, providing a marvellous spectacle for the people. And the spirit descended upon him, and he himself became the divine Deucalian, the sole survivor of the great flood, able to create men from stones and populate a waste world.

In the gallery below Varro said to King Philip: "I once saw the real Nero standing on the tower of Maecenas drinking in the spectacle of Rome burning." King Philip said: "He is terribly genuine. Often I myself believe he is Nero." Varro said: "The real Nero did not climb the tower of Maecenas for aesthetic reasons, but to get a bird's-eye view of the fire, so that he might take proper measures against it. The real Nero never had any intention of setting Rome on fire. It's strange. Because people believed that the real Nero set Rome on fire, this town of Apamea must be inundated now in honour of the false Nero. For otherwise the world would refuse to believe that our false Nero is the real one." "Yes," King Philip agreed, "every reasonable man must adopt such crooked ways if he wants reason to prevail. This part of the

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world can only be made to submit to a humane policy, it seems, by stupid and contemptible means." And they could feel almost physically their loathing and hatred of the irrationality of human nature and the frailty of human reason.

The man up on the tower was beginning to shiver with cold. His journey had been exhausting, and by now he had stood a long time up there staring at the yellow flood, and his eyes pained him. He was no longer Deucalion ; indeed it took him all his time to maintain the bearing of Nero ; he was almost the potter Terence again. A faint terror touched him, he was dismayed by his own greatness. While he gazed at the sinking town of Apamea he thought : "What enormous wealth is sunk there—ten millions, twenty millions. How much bread and cheese and wine one could buy for that, how much clay and bronze for statues. And it was all destroyed for me. My father was right when he gave me the proud and absurd name of Maximus. But if he had foreseen this, he would have been afraid and given me some other name. For no good can come of this."

CHAPTER XXXVII

THE WEEK OF KNIVES AND DAGGERS

THE crime which the Christians had committed, bribed by the Emperor Titus, roused indignation all over Syria. In several garrisons the soldiers tore down the effigy of Titus and replaced it with that of Nero. The greater part of the fourteenth legion and large contingents belonging to the fifth, sixth and twelfth went over to Nero. The native population were filled with fury against Titus, Jumping Jack and all the rest of that band. The Government had difficulty in putting down the riots which broke out in several towns, even in certain quarters of Antioch, and for the time being they could not contemplate attacking, with troops on which they could not depend, the fortresses along the banks of the Euphrates that had fallen into Terence's hands.

Varro could now report with truth to King Artaban that almost a fourth of the Imperial province of Syria, along with several great towns and fortresses, was securely in the hands of Nero. In accordance with his promise Artaban sent troops and money to his friend the Roman Emperor.

Knops was proud that his brain had given birth to the idea which had wrought such an enormous change. He thought he had now earned the right to be listened to in other matters as well, along with that aristocratic pair,

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Varro and Philip. At the next meeting of the cabinet he accordingly proposed that in order to consolidate the successes they had won the Emperor should intermit the rule of mercy and allow him and Trebonius a week of stern and summary justice. He said: "The Emperor's supporters whose fidelity is proved must be allowed to settle drastically with their enemies. I propose that for this purpose full powers be given to Trebonius and myself to form a sort of voluntary police. Preparations have already been made for this; we have a list of reliable men. With the help of this voluntary police we can deal with our most dangerous enemies, if the Emperor will consent."

Varro and King Philip gazed in front of them with a troubled air. Trebonius enthusiastically supported the plan of his friend, the Secretary of State. The Emperor smiled absently and indulgently, his mind was obsessed with the dark and picturesque phrase: "A week of knives and daggers." Also he felt grateful to Knops for that proud night on the tower of Apamea. "A week of knives and daggers," he said dreamily to himself. Varro and King Philip held their tongues; they had no hope of prevailing against the other three. If you summoned the mob to your help, you had to make concessions to it.

The Emperor signed the documents which Knops and Trebonius laid before him, and they accordingly formed, Knops in Edessa, Trebonius in Samosata, small troops which they called the Avengers of Nero, and with these fell upon their enemies. It was an easy matter to treat as an enemy of the Emperor, as an adherent of Titus or even of Christ, the god of that scandalous and revolutionary sect, anyone against whom you had a grudge. In all the towns along the Euphrates, in Commagene and the territory of Edessa, the Avengers of Nero broke into the houses of people they disliked, killed them, tortured them,

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arrested them, raped them, seized their property and sold them as slaves. Knops did not have many of the Christians in Mesopotamia killed. He saved up most of them for propaganda purposes. He decided to use them to teach the world a lesson. He would prove that the usurper Titus and his servants had hatched a plot of the most contemptible kind against the good honest Syrians, so as to take vengeance on them for their fidelity to their legitimate overlord, the Emperor Nero.

His overweening vanity led him to concentrate on John of Patmos in this trial of strength. The actor was deeply hateful to him. And not merely because of John's contemptuous references to Terence. Knops hated his very look, his voice, his face, his Christianity. He wanted to have him in his power, to play with him and mock him. He gave instructions to the Avengers of Nero to deliver up unharmed the man John of Patmos.

So in the middle of the night Knops's messengers descended upon John's house. The house and all that was in it were given over to them, but John himself they must deliver up unscathed. They tore him and his young son Alexai out of their beds and proceeded methodically to smash up everything they could lay their hands upon.

John looked on with a sort of scornful interest. Now they had got to his books and manuscripts. It was a sin that he could not part from these vain toys, that his heart still clung to the heathen classics and not to the Word of God alone, and the fact that he had to stand by helplessly while these beasts destroyed the books he loved so much was a deserved punishment. So he looked on with compressed lips as they tore the precious rolls and parchments to tatters. The rolls they had in their hands now contained the tragedies of Sophocles, which he loved most of all his books. The good parchment resisted their efforts and refused to be torn. They stamped upon it

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and spat upon it. John had remained quite calm ; but when he saw them treating so shamefully these books that still spoke to him across the ages, he could not prevent a groan from escaping him. Young Alexai, forgetting the humility and resignation which his father had taught him, could not restrain himself when he heard that groan. He flung himself on the barbarians and with his weak fists struck out at them in furious silence. The Avengers of Nero, glad that they need not stand on ceremony with the son at least, struck him down. He fell among the tattered books. At that John gave out a loud and dreadful cry. But they held to their instructions and did not touch him. They did not beat him ; they did not even order him to be silent. They merely held him so that he should not disturb them, and silently and methodically went on with their work, while he gazed on helplessly, groaning. Thereupon, in accordance with their instructions, they handed over John, still unscathed, to Knops.

This happened in Edessa, in the Week of Knives and Daggers. King Mallukh was still absent from his capital. Far out in the wilderness he inhaled in the freedom which the men of the West cut off from him in his own town of Edessa. He camped with strangers under the clear bright stars, himself unknown to them, and while they sat quietly round the well, he related circumstantially a bright and coloured legend of a man who had once been a potter and who by the grace of the star gods Aumu, Aziz and Dusaris had become the ruler of the world.

CHAPTER XXXVIII

PRIDE AND HUMILITY

WHEN the Christians appeared before the Praetor they made up a considerable list ; most of them were humble, simple, inoffensive people. They had been well prepared for their trial, had been mishandled and intimidated in every conceivable way. Some of them were still trembling ; but that was only their feeble flesh. Their hearts were filled with trust in the Lord. Their priests had told them that it was an honour to be chosen by God to witness for Him with their blood. Many managed to face the Praetor and humbly and piously maintain their innocence. A few, it is true, howled for mercy and were ready to admit anything that was demanded of them. But their admissions were not required. Certain servants of the Governor, the scribe Ariston at their head, along with others caught in the very act with their Government bribes upon them, had already confessed everything necessary, knowing that they would be indulgently treated. The plot had been exposed to its last ramifications.

Knops looked forward with joy to the trial. The sect of Christians who chose as their God a poor crucified man instead of an almighty deity had always seemed highly ridiculous to him, and he despised them from the bottom of his heart.

Born a slave, he was filled with an overwhelming

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reverence for all that was strong and commanding, and to him it seemed idiotic to praise a poor humble man and worship him as a god. His keen, ironical wit had always been particularly effective when he exercised it upon the Christians. He had an excellent understanding of the soul of the mob. It couldn't be very difficult to show up these Christians as soft-spoken, hypocritical, treacherous rascals, who would like to see the whole world destroyed in one great flood. Knops looked forward with satisfaction to teaching John a stern lesson. Before he finally struck him to the dust he would have as much fun out of him as he could, play at cat and mouse with him, and not settle his hash until afterwards.

So he took care to be present during John's interrogation. The doors of the Hall of Justice stood wide open that day, and the square in front was thick with people eager to hear how the actor would answer Knops and the Praetor for his awful crimes.

Knops began in that tone of smooth politeness for which he was famous: "Come, my John, tell me now really why you and your people destroyed the temple of Tarate?" "That's just what I should like to ask you, Knops," John retorted with gloomy satisfaction. "Why on earth should I or any of us commit such an enormous folly, since it could only please you and your like and your so-called Nero?" "Come, my dear John," replied Knops softly, almost merrily. "One could think of quite a number of reasons. For instance, you might have done it to rob the goddess Tarate of her shrine, drive her out of the country and leave the Syrian people defenceless. Or you might have assumed that such a criminal act, such a destructive act, would be a signal to all the subversive elements in the country and make them rise like a flood against the legitimate Emperor Nero. Or you might have done it simply out of hatred against

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civilisation, hatred against all that is noble and beautiful, against property, order, the family, against all the gods except your own, the Crucified."

Knops's words made a deep impression. John had not intended to say much before this court. But he saw that his fellow-believers were waiting for his answer; he saw the vast crowd hanging on his words. He must reply. "We do not revile those who do not believe as we do," he said with calm dignity, "even when we consider their opinions to be false. Our God will root out the false faiths in his good time without our aid. Also we are not enemies of civilisation; what we hate is mere vainglory, greed, unbridled lust. We believe that civilisation is measure, accordance with the divine order. We wish to take away no one's god. Let each man keep his god and allow us to keep ours."

"I am surprised to hear, my dear John," Knops replied with sly amiability, "that you are no enemy of property. And yet I have heard that a certain John renounced his property, put it away, cast it from him." "I shall not try to explain that to you, Knops," said John contemptuously. "You would not understand that with your slave's mind." Knops did not lose his temper. "I thought," he said with friendly surprise, "that you were for the poor and oppressed." "So we are," retorted John. "But there are poor spirits and poor slaves whom we do despise, and these are the poor men who try to become rich and the slaves who lust after power. Our Master and God aimed at such vermin as you when he taught: Let the servant remain a servant." And he gazed so scornfully at Knops that in spite of his brazen impudence Knops almost dropped his eyes.

Yet he did not pulverise John, but after a quite small pause replied in a tone of polité irony: "In your place, John, I would not assert so arrogantly that it is the will

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of God to divide men into high and low, masters and servants, and fix the calling of every man. For if God signifies by outward success who is blessed and who is accursed, then you, John, are certainly not among the elect. Where is your son Alexai, John? And where do you yourself stand now?" In that soft question was concentrated all the venom and the base triumph of the world.

The crowd stood listening breathlessly. John's heart was almost bursting. He shot out at Knops his huge head with the unkempt beard, his dark eyes glittered, his broad breast rose and fell. But he controlled himself. "Wretched man," he said. "Such are your triumphs. Yes, you have murdered my innocent son. And that, I suppose, is your proof that we started the flood? Wretched man. There was once a great fire in Rome. A certain Nero could think of nothing better at the time than to accuse our brethren of having started it. And his sole proof that they started it was that he had them butchered. Where is that Nero now? He died a miserable death." He had not intended to speak. But his heart was on fire and he could not stop. He renounced all appeal to reason, he must tell these judges and this man Knops and these people what was in his mind and his heart, just as it came to him. "Look to yourselves," he said, turning to his judges, "you who sit there in the name of one who is a miserable caricature of that Nero who was at least Nero. Judge not that ye be not judged, for the Day of Judgment is at hand. A world," and he turned to Knops again, "in which creatures sit in judgment such as you and your master, that wretched shadow of the great monster, must perish. The Last Judgment will come, it will be upon you soon. Then those who let loose the flood will stand before their Judge, and we who seem so small and powerless to-day will bear witness

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against them. And you, Knops, and your like will stand there in your wretched nakedness, as you were born. You are unhappy men, doomed and driven, you and your Terence and your Trebonius." He had spoken without raising his voice. But his contempt, his loathing mingled with pity, were so palpable in his fine voice, were shown so clearly on his furrowed face, that everybody: judges, prisoners, spectators, gazed with open horror and detestation at Knops.

But now that he stood exposed in his hideous nakedness before them all, Knops could no longer control himself; his dignity, his borrowed splendour, fell from him. With a furious red face and a breaking voice he began to curse and bawl as if he were in a tavern: "You dog, you swindling prophet, you son of a whore, do you think we're afraid of your miserable god, the Crucified? You'll soon stand before him yourself, you lying dog, and before his famous Last Judgment, too. Perhaps you think you'll go to the paradise of the blessed? You'll soon see and smell and taste what paradise you'll get. You'll have your fill of it. It won't be very big. It will be an ell broad and three ells long, just as long and broad as the place that your wretched carcass will take up in the carrion pit, and people will smell it far and wide." It took him some time to regain control of himself.

The people respectfully made way for him as he left; nobody shouted a scornful word; indeed, several said: "Greeting, Knops, you good and great judge." Nevertheless in his impotent rage he felt that his exit had been by no means an impressive one.

CHAPTER XXXIX

RIVALS

LIKE all the other prisoners, John was condemned to death.

Embittered by his public failure, Knops considered how he could make as humiliating as possible the execution of his hated enemy. He had a head on his shoulders and soon hit upon the very idea. During the course of the spectacle which he was arranging to celebrate the triumph of the Emperor over his enemies, John should give a last great performance for the delectation of the spectators. There would be a representation of the flood by which Zeus destroyed the generation of the iron age. The Christians would represent that condemned generation; the arena would be slowly flooded and the Christians would drown in the most realistic manner, with John helplessly bound to a rock, so that his last struggles might be seen by everybody.

Unluckily there were obstacles to the execution of this plan. At the meeting of the cabinet where, under the Emperor's presidency, the fate of the condemned men was discussed, these fops Varro and King Philip resolutely opposed the idea of putting the actor to such a shameful death. They declared that it would cause public resentment if an artist of John's rank were made to die in such an opprobrious fashion. "I consider the proposal neither expedient nor in good taste," Varro bluntly said. "John

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made a deep impression on the people during the trial. If we execute him so savagely the people will mourn him for years and call us barbarians." And King Philip turned to Knops and informed him in his calmly superior way: "You won't help the Emperor, you'll only damage him, if you show your hatred against John too openly." Where John was concerned Knops lost his usual cunning. He exclaimed that they must not fritter away the success won at Apamea by fatuous humanitarianism. Trebonius loudly supported him. Varro retorted coolly that the Week of Knives and Daggers was at an end, and it was advisable to show clearly that the time for mildness and justice had come again. Knops sharply replied that this was a case in which to act strongly was the same thing as to act justly; to spare the actor would not be mildness, but both weak and wrong. They all reiterated their arguments anew with a great expense of words, and gazed at Nero.

Nero was at a loss. He hated John and felt inclined to agree with Knops and Trebonius. On the other hand he had a respect for higher things, and the objections of the two aristocrats impressed him. Like Varro and Philip he considered it barbarous to execute a great artist; like them he considered that the artist was raised above the laws that bound the ordinary man. He would have liked John to die a shameful death, but at the same time he wanted to behave in his own eyes and in those of Varro and Philip as a man who respected the artist even in the enemy.

But was John really a great artist? That was the question. And that doubt gave him an argument to quash the objections of these snobs. He began to find fault with John's art, spoke of the lack of passion with which John rendered the great speech of Oedipus beginning with the words: "What happened here hap-

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pened with highest right, And never shall I think the contrary", and went on to criticise in detail other parts played by John where he showed his incapacity for true pathos. But in aesthetic matters King Philip refused to palter ; he saw in John the greatest artist in the East, perhaps in the whole world. So he contradicted Terence and obstinately stuck up for his views. The cabinet meeting, to the great annoyance of Trebonius and Knops, threatened to turn into a discussion on aesthetics.

Then Varro, who knew his Terence well, raised another point. If the Emperor, he said, publicly executed John, Cejonius and the people on the Palatine would maintain that he had done it simply out of envy and professional spite. Terence retorted in a haughty voice that the people on the Palatine were barbarians and what they said left him cold ; but one could see that he was struck by Varro's words, and Knops became uneasy. The idea of drowning John had not been a very happy one ; for it was bound to make the Emperor, not to speak of the spectators, think of the attempt of the real Nero to get rid of his mother by an engineered shipwreck. Oh, Knops had been unlucky throughout in this affair of John. But for the moment Varro's stroke must be parried, and to finish the business he produced his most poisonous weapon ; he reminded the Emperor that John had been guilty of *lèse-majesté*.

He began by modestly observing, while the others were still discussing John's art, that he knew little about artistic matters. Nevertheless, he would venture to assert that John could not have much real inward understanding of the actor's art. Hadn't the fellow declared, apparently with conviction, too, that the potter Terence was as wretched an actor as he was an Emperor ; his Nero was deplorable.

John's sneer was unjust. It immediately appeared

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that Terence's Nero was by no means deplorable, but highly genuine. For Terence managed to bring off a careless wave of the hand and a mild, good-humoured, superior smile, accompanied with a faintly amused shake of the head. Then he declared in a bored voice that his counsellors must have patience. He would not decide John's fate until the gods spoke and told him their will through his daimon, his inner voice.

But Varro and Philip were certain that Knops's arrow had hit the mark and that the will of the gods would roughly resemble his proposal.

CHAPTER XL

THE REVELATION OF JOHN

MEANWHILE John was sitting in his cell, cut off from the other prisoners, and filled with despair.

He was examining himself and his behaviour in the Hall of Justice ; and he was not pleased with himself. The manner in which he had borne himself before the Praetor, the manner in which he had treated that absurd, wretched man Knops, could not be pleasing to God. He had not behaved like one of the great prophets who uttered the wrath of God and called men to repentance, he had merely given a performance, he had played the prophet, he had been the actor, perhaps one of God's actors, but at bottom no better than that potter fellow. He had played the prophet just as that man played the Emperor. Where was the difference ? They were all actors. Everyone of them dramatised himself instead of being what God had made him, a nonentity who should show some humility instead of puffing himself up.

Vanity of vanities. The Anti-Christ was reigning. He had assumed the most perilous of shapes, that of an actor who traded on the folly of the world. What a lot. A slave aping an Emperor, one bad actor mimicking another bad actor, and the world praised that wretched shadow of a shadow, acclaimed him, and were letting loose in his honour a deluge which must destroy every

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temple and city and finally mankind himself. What a loathsome triumvirate: this potter who aped the Emperor, on his right the vulgar, megalomaniac soldier, on his left the little, sharp climber whose power was founded on the conviction that men were still more stupid than even the most disillusioned sceptic thought them. And most horrible of all: before this three-headed monster the world rolled in ecstasy in the dust.

Why had God made such a wretched world? Perhaps he had made it for his amusement, as the Senator Varro had made the false Nero for his amusement. But men were the wretched impotent victims of that joke. We are like broken toys, he thought, I, John, and Alexai, my son. Oh, Alexai, my young, gentle, strong Alexai, trampled to death, shovelled into the clay like a dead beast. What was man?

John crouched in his corner, shaken by the torments of Job and the dance of Kohelet. Yet he did not feel proud to be a Job or a Kohelet and did not try to patch out of their rags a fine new garment for himself. He did not consider himself better than other men because he suffered more and realised his suffering more deeply. Was one man very different from another man? No man could boast he was better than another, no man possessed himself, neither his sufferings, nor his doubts, nor his vanity, nor even his face, as was shown by that wicked Emperor and his ape, the potter.

We are like ants, he thought, or like the bees, all the same, and like these condemned to work without knowing to what purpose. The bees and the ants busily carry things about, bits of offal or honey from flowers, they don't know to what end; a mysterious law drives them on, hounds them on, plays with them, imposes unending labours upon them. None of them is anything in itself, each is only a puny part of the whole, fated to die when it

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is cut off from the others, condemned to an activity whose meaning it does not know when it remains with the others. "Go to the ant, thou sluggard," the preacher had said. But why? If you follow the example of the ant what have you gained? It is only the good that fades and dies. The evil survives for ever. Nero is immortal.

John went on brooding. He asked his God: "Why has the world fallen into the hands of heathens and fools?" And he shrank, for he had a revelation. He heard the voice of God, and God gave him his answer. "The creation," God told him, "is growing old and has passed its prime. I have resolved to renew it. The great turn of time is at hand."

John brooded over the mystery of that answer. Wild dreams persecuted him, visions of the destruction of the old world and of the new dispensation. Oh, the roads in his time had grown narrow, wretched and hard to walk on. But worst of all was the transition from this age to the next one; for the transition was a sort of judgment day.

He was assailed by awful visions of that day of judgment, and he supped on its horrors until he could endure them no longer. No one, he told himself, could breathe a single easy breath if he knew what time had in store for him. Only cattle and beasts could be happy; for they had no judgment to fear. Even if I should attain eternal bliss, he told himself, what would it avail me, since I must suffer in expectation the tortures of that unutterably terrible judgment? Poor wretched man, poor rejected multitude, fated to be ruled by Anti-Christ and his ape.

CHAPTER XLI

VANITY OF VANITIES

INTO these dreams a very real shape entered, a long thin man enveloped in a grey cloak. "Arise, John of Patmos," said the man, "and come with me." "Have you been sent to take my life?" asked John. "Why are you so polite about it?" Then he suddenly shouted in a furious voice: "Be quick about it, fellow. Strike, and end this business."

"I am not the hangman," said the tall man, looking reflectively and somewhat awkwardly at his hands. "I merely want to get you out of this, my John, and give you a horse and a pass and an escort to take you to safety."

John glanced with mixed feelings at the long man. Was the fellow playing a joke on him? And even if he was telling the truth, if he had really come to save his life, should he accept his help or reject it? It was a relief to have turned away from the world. Whatever might await him beyond the grave, any torment there would be preferable to the pettiness and the misery of this world. And John, in his greed for experience, was filled with an intense curiosity about the Judgment Day in spite of his dread of it. Had not God virtually commanded him to make an end of things here and present himself to the Last Judgment? He made up his mind to say no to the tempter and drive him away with contumely.

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But then a new idea suddenly occurred to him. Could it be mere chance that God had sent this mysterious disguised messenger to him immediately after the vast and wild visions of the night? Could it be a sign? It was a sign. It was God's will that he should live, that he should write down the visions of that night and go about the world proclaiming them. Was there not a little of the actor in every prophet? God had made him an actor with a little touch of the prophet. He had reached the stage now where the actor could at last prophesy. John recognised his mission.

He got up from his pallet and stepped over to the unknown man. "You look like an aristocrat," he said. "Who are you? Who sent you here? Who can want to rescue me from the mob at the risk of his life?" "Why do you wish to know?" asked the other man, and his long pale face twitched slightly. "Isn't it enough that someone wants to do it? Can't you conceive that even in this vulgar and bestial world there may be some people who can't bear the thought of an animal like Knops butchering John of Patmos for the pleasure of the mob?" And he added softly, as if in doing so he hoped to convince the actor of his honesty: "I can't bear it myself."

John sat down on his pallet again. "This is really curious," he said in surprise, more to himself than to the other. "I always thought I was the only one so infatuated with art. And I want to tell you, my dear sir," he went on, "that no one has any reason to pride himself on being infatuated with art. Believe me, I have had experience. It's an accursedly equivocal, blasphemous and vain business, one should try to wean oneself from it. It's a kind of sickness. Anyone who suffers from it is marked."

He fell silent. After a while he began again more familiarly. "You give me an unpleasant choice, stranger. Perhaps God has summoned me to his Judgment, and it

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would be a sin if I tried to evade his command. But God may also wish me to live to fight that beast, the Anti-Christ. I have had certain visions, and it may be worth my while to set them down and proclaim them to the world, so that they may not die with me. Who can say? But look well to yourself, stranger, and don't worship me because I am an artist. Your admiration may be no better than that of the mob, who roll on their bellies before the potter, Nero's ape, because he let loose a second-rate flood on a second-rate city, so as to have a chance to recite the bad verses of the real Nero."

The other man took a deep breath. "Forgive me," he said, "if I can't obey you. All I can realise yet is that you have decided to live, and my joy at the news has driven all other thoughts from my mind. You have lifted a great burden from my mind."

He hesitated. Then he began again: "Will you let me make a request? What I am doing for you isn't altogether without danger. What I ask of you means a great deal to me, and it can't mean much to you."

"Speak," said John. His mouth was twisted in a wry smile. So the man wasn't acting out of pure love for art, but expected some reward for his action; his feeble chin had displeased John from the start.

But John had been too hasty. The man began hesitatingly and respectfully: "If you want to remain safe you'll have to live for a while away from society. Who knows when we'll hear your voice again reciting the Greek tragedies. Will you consider me very importunate if I ask you to recite once more for me the great speech of Oedipus?"

The smile faded from John's face; a look of painful embarrassment took its place. "You actually love my voice so much as that?" he said. "You're a hopeless fool."

VANITY OF VANITIES

"Call me a fool, an idiot, or what you like," King Philip persisted, "but recite the verses for me."

And then the actor John committed the greatest sin of his life and let himself be tempted into the vainest of vanities. For instead of the speech of Oedipus he recited the visions of that night, his visions of doubt and despair and repentance, and thus made those visions, his son's death and his own sufferings worthless in the eyes of God.

Then he disappeared into the darkness, into the wilderness, to take up the fight again.

CHAPTER XLII

TRIAL BALANCE

KNOPS foamed with rage when he heard that John had escaped. He guessed that Varro or King Philip had had a hand in it, but he could do nothing against these two men. He revenged himself for John's flight on the other Christians. To carry out his plan of a great artificial flood he called in the services of the best technicians, and employed the most up-to-date apparatus. At the spectacle celebrating the glorious victory of Nero over the criminal intrigues of the usurper Titus, the spectators got good value for their money, and they gazed on in rapturous delight while the Christians drowned; they were like children watching the sufferings of puppies. The spectacle lasted well into the night, and to illuminate the arena a row of prisoners covered with pitch and wrapped in tow were used as living torches. This final ingenious embellishment made a deeper impression than the spectacle itself. The living torches were much talked about not only in Mesopotamia but all over the Roman Empire, and were remembered for long by people who quickly forgot other acts more important in themselves committed by the real and the false Nero.

Eight hundred human beings met their death in this spectacle: that was not a very large number as such things went. Nevertheless, Varro's dispute over

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the six thousand sesterces, or, if you will, his idea of the union of the East and the West, had already brought several thousand people to death and created much misery in Syria and Mesopotamia, and before the game ended many more would die and far greater misery be suffered by the country.

Book III
DECLINE

CHAPTER XLIII

REASON AND THE FORTUNES OF WAR

CEJONIUS heard and read the reports of what was happening on the Euphrates frontier, and he continued to be more amazed than angry. Were such things credible? Had Minerva, the Goddess of Wisdom, vanished from the world and left it to its own folly? Could such a silly farce as the inundation of Apamea rouse a whole province to revolt? Could people actually believe that he, Cejonius, had destroyed the shrine of the goddess of Syria to take revenge on a few wretched natives? Could there be minds so simple that they did not see through such a clumsy fraud? The despatches from the frontier finally taught him that such impossibilities could be. The news from Mesopotamia showed him that Varro's method was the right one; the more firmly one counted on the stupidity of the world, the more certain was one's success.

This realisation wounded him deeply, and the more deeply because he saw there was no possibility of effectually opposing the swindle. He could not send troops against Mesopotamia without risking a war with the Parthians. Nor could he negotiate with Artaban for the surrender of the false Nero, for he had not recognised Artaban. He could deal only with Pakor, and Pakor had not the power to subdue Nero. It was a vicious circle, from which there was no escape.

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Cejonius now coyly avoided the covered shrine with the wax bust of his forefather who had been so ignominiously defeated by barbarians. He grew wise. Seldom did one see a trace of Jumping Jack now. His counsellors no longer had any reason to complain that he let himself be hurried into hasty actions. On the contrary, if he had been too impetuous at one time, he could now be moved to take action only with the utmost difficulty, and he never ventured to take any steps until he was assured of the approval of the Palatine. His couriers flew across the sea to Rome. But the instructions he received from the Palatine were dilatory and non-committal. So long as the swindler threatened only the frontier of Syria and not the capital itself, said Rome, Cejonius should confine himself strictly to defence and at all costs avoid a war with Parthia. He was confidentially informed that the Emperor was sinking into a state of increasing lethargy; and it was difficult to get decisions and signatures out of him. In these circumstances one could not risk serious differences with the Parthians, far less a war.

This policy was reasonable, but also undignified. There he sat, with seven army corps at his disposal, and he had to look on helplessly while fools and traitors with barbarian hordes behind them fell upon his towns, looted them, tore down the standards and eagles of the Roman Emperor, trampled them underfoot, and set up in their place the fraudulent colours of the swindler Nero. Sometimes Cejonius's rage almost choked him when he thought of the difference between what he was forced to do and what he would have liked to do, and he could not bear the thought of that contrast and relapsed into one of his old rages. Once he leapt out of bed in the middle of the night and summoned his secretary. He stood there in his night-gown, small and

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meagre, his shoulders convulsively flung back, his harsh bony head very erect, hectic patches on his pale cheeks, and in a sharp voice dictated to the secretary orders that the fifth, the sixth and the tenth legions should assemble at Larissa and prepare to cross the Euphrates at Sura. But before the order was written out reason had triumphed and he recalled it.

Grinding his teeth, he acknowledged that Minerva was a severe goddess who demanded patience and yet more patience from her followers. Reason was unpopular. The mob crowned with success the irrational man, and they jeered at the rational man as a coward. Yet it did not take very much courage to attack; but to swallow defiance and insult and wait until the time was ripe, and one's belated reward was within one's reach, needed courage and self-renunciation. He was forced to learn self-mastery now, forced to go to the bitter school of wisdom. For it did not look as if Nero's hash could be settled so easily. He was digging himself in more and more firmly along the Syrian frontier. One after another the little fortresses on the Euphrates fell into his hands.

Cejonius's officers grumbled. The perpetual guerilla war on the frontier stung them to the quick. It was ridiculous to look on without doing anything, while a crowd of bandits played at ducks and drakes with the Empire. Many of them openly declared that if such things went on much longer they would go over to the pretender Nero, whoever he might be.

The fact that Cejonius did not dare to cross the Euphrates made Trebonius bolder than ever. He actually set about attacking the fortress of Sura, which guarded the main stream of the Euphrates. He gathered troops together on the right bank to the north of Sura, had redoubts thrown up on the left bank, brought up battering-

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rams and catapults, and began a regular siege of the fortress.

Now Aufidius, the commander on the southern frontier, had resolved to keep to the defensive, in obedience to his bitter instructions from Antioch. But when an enemy kept tickling one's foot-soles, was a man really expected to remain quiet and pay no attention? Was he expected to look on quietly while all round him hills were being levelled, walls and fortifications built, besieging engines and materials for a boat-bridge busily arriving, if he knew he was strong enough to smash the whole business with one stout attack? Wasn't a conscientious officer in duty bound to destroy these preparations in time, if the action demanded a comparatively trifling use of his forces? If he did that could it possibly be construed as an attack, or would it pass as defence?

Aufidius called it defence, crossed the Euphrates unexpectedly in force, destroyed the fortifications and engines which Trebonius had set up, and pushed forward to the stream Belichus. When he reached it he found on the other bank of the stream half a cavalry regiment of Parthians, picked troops. Like the Romans, and for similar reasons, they had also received instructions to confine themselves to the defensive. So they did not intervene, but stood there like a wall of steel.

Now professional curiosity had impelled Fronto to examine the preparations which Trebonius was making to besiege Sura. Profiting by the curious neutrality which Edessa still extended to him, and supported by Varro, he managed to secure the necessary pass. So on the morning that Aufidius made his attack he was riding, an inquisitive observer, in the neighbourhood of Sura, and on a slight rising to the west of the Belichus stopped for a while beside a little cavalry division of Trebonius,

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Roman troops from Edessa under the command of a young officer called Lucius, which had been driven there by Aufidius's attack.

Fronto remained for a while on the slight rising, looking over the field from the back of his horse. The plain before him was covered with dust; Aufidius's advance, the clash between his troops and the opposing ones, had raised a great cloud of dust in which vague masses could be discerned moving about. But Fronto had sharp eyes and saw quite enough. He saw that Aufidius's advance had created a situation similar to one described in his manual of military art, a strategical situation which enabled army B., in this case that of Trebonius, to cut off its opponent A., in this case Aufidius, from his base, in this case the fortress of Sura. With luck this stratagem would render the fortress, deprived of its best men, ripe for storming. That incapable fool Trebonius had not read the manual, of course; consequently he did not recognise his marvellous opportunity or show any sign of seizing it.

Fronto's heart beat fast. Here was his chance to demonstrate by a striking example the truth of the daring, modern theories outlined in his manual—his enemies called them mad. Aufidius's troops were still halted on the near bank of the Belichus. They would not advance any further. They would not attack the Parthians. They had achieved their aim, they had destroyed the fortifications and engines, they would now withdraw in an orderly fashion to Sura with the booty they had won. Now was the moment to strike and take them in the rear, no matter with how small a force; at the same time they must be attacked on both flanks by Trebonius's main army. It was a chance such as he had been longing for all his life; it would not come a second time. It would still be his for another ten

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minutes, another five minutes ; for after ten minutes or perhaps five Aufidius would sound the retreat, and then it would be too late.

Fronto sat motionless on his horse ; his face was calm, but every nerve in him was tensely watching. "Take it easy, Fronto," he told himself. "No nonsense now. You have reached forty-eight and kept your sense : be sensible now. Remain sensible for five or ten minutes. Then this temptation will be past. Don't endanger your future and your comfortable old age. Don't fling away everything you've toiled and slaved for till now."

It was seventeen minutes to eleven when Fronto thought this. At fifteen minutes to eleven he turned to the young officer who commanded the division : "Have you got good eyes, my Lucius ? Can you see through all this dust ?" Fronto was not greatly liked but thoroughly respected, and when the great theoretician spoke to him the young officer flushed with pleasure. "I have good eyes," he replied. "Do you see that," asked Fronto, "and that, and that ?" and in great haste but with perfect precision he explained the whole situation. Lucius was by no means stupid and he understood immediately. He grasped the uniqueness of the opportunity, and he gazed into Fronto's face, excited and thrilled. "Will you entrust your men to me, my Lucius ?" Fronto asked, and in the question there was so much command and so much suggestion that Lucius replied without hesitation in the usual formula : "I obey." "Ride to your commander," Fronto said. "Explain the situation here to him. Beg him to attack with his whole force on both flanks. If you can explain the position to him, then you and I may have changed the fate of the Empire for some years." Lucius was all attention and obedience. "I obey," he replied, then he shouted, "Mars and Nero," and galloped off.

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Everything went exactly as Fronto had said in his manual. It was venturesome to attempt such a manoeuvre with such a small force. But as the manual had said, that force was sufficient to hold up the enemy for the necessary ten minutes. Lucius was smart and energetic, Trebonius a soldier of great experience and quick decision. In a minute he had overcome his hatred and mistrust of Fronto, and he gave the necessary orders in time.

The losses of Nero's troops in this decisive battle were trifling. The only division which suffered serious casualties was the one whose command Fronto took over. Fronto himself remained unscathed to the last. Not until victory was assured was he hit by an arrow.

He lay on the ground groaning and twisting and vomiting blood. The doctors shrugged their shoulders ; there was no sense in moving him.

Ants were running about near him. Straining his eyes, he tried to follow the paths they took. He envied the ants and hated them. He had not even the strength to squash them. They would run about, Nero-Terence would sit on his throne, Jumping Jack would get annoyed and jump. He, Fronto, would neither run about nor sit still nor get annoyed ; he would be dead.

He had won. His solution of a particularly interesting problem had been tested ; it had proved to be correct, and the tactics he had employed would no doubt be known for all time by his name. And what of it ? He had paid dearly for his victory. His calm reflective old age was gone, his manual would never be finished, a thousand, or to put it more moderately, two to three hundred pleasant nights with Marcia would never take place now, and many other things would not take place. But Nero would be able to hold out somewhat longer, and in the military academies lecturers would speak of Fronto's tactics.

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He was a fool. Only forty-eight: he might have lived for thirty years still. This accursed East. What was Nero to him, or the fortress of Sura? He should not have let himself be stung by the senseless itch of these fools round him. He grinned in wry resignation. The Flavians' instructions were right after all: in case of doubt it was really better to do nothing than to do something rash.

He vomited again, groaning. The last words that Lucius, who had now returned, could catch from the groaning man's lips were: "Real or unreal. It's a dirty business."

When Varro heard of the victory of Sura and the death of Fronto he went hot and cold. Now Fronto, too, the cool calculating Fronto, had come over to him. Had come over to him and was dead. It was a bitter jest of fate to have sent him his friend and the important frontier fortress of Sura at the same time, and then to have robbed him of his friend, the only one who understood him.

He reflected how long it had taken the inaudible dialogue which he had carried on with Fronto for so many years to find utterance. He thought of the indirect ways in which Fronto had shown his liking for him, and of the length of time it had taken for that liking to translate itself into action and bring Fronto to his death. He saw the man with the iron-grey hair mechanically pushing about the heavy ball with his light yellow sandal, meanwhile reflectively listening with a faint smile. He could feel his friend so palpably in the room that he involuntarily made as if to lean back to see him better. And he felt also an emotion which he had hardly ever known before: he felt remorse. Remorse that he had not enjoyed that friendship more whole-heartedly. He grieved for the hours that he might have passed with

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the dead man, hours which he had failed to seize at the right time.

He was not the only one who mourned a friend. What was to become of Marcia now that Fronto was dead?

Before he had time to go to his daughter her maid appeared in great agitation. The Empress was so queer, she said. The maid did not know what to do. She felt she could not speak about what she had seen and heard to anyone but Varro himself. When Marcia was told of Fronto's death she had burst out laughing, and she had gone on laughing in a shrill voice for a long time. Then, when the fit was past, she had locked herself in her room, and she had been sitting there now for several hours, refusing to eat or to make any answer when they spoke to her. But the maid had heard her talking to herself. "Well?" asked Varro when the girl stopped. "What did she say?" he went on encouragingly. "That's just it," the maid replied in confusion. "I couldn't let anybody into the next room. She was talking so queerly." "But what did she say?" Varro repeated impatiently. The maid turned away. "It was—it was so common. I didn't understand it all, but you simply couldn't believe it was the Empress using such words."

Varro himself went to listen to his daughter. Right enough, words could be heard coming through the locked door. Obscene words. Cynical, lascivious terms of endearment. They were the words which the dead man had used when he was making love. Marcia was showering endearments on her dead lover and the dead man was replying to her.

Varro could not get Marcia to let him in. Finally they had to break open the door. Marcia's mind was deranged, and she screamed when her father made to approach her.

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So Varro was now quite alone.

When he returned from Fronto's funeral he took out the receipt for the six thousand sesterces. Under the heading "Losses" he entered: "Marcia out of her mind. Fronto dead." Under the heading "Gains" he marked: "Sura taken."

CHAPTER XLIV

A SCEPTIC

AFTER the fall of Sura both banks of the Euphrates and all Mesopotamia from the Armenian to the Arabian frontier solemnly recognised Varro's Nero as the Roman Emperor.

Amid the universal jubilation there were few doubters. But one person no victory, however great, could convince that the gods would continue to show favour to this so-called Emperor. That was Caja, the woman with whom Nero had lived while it pleased him to assume the body of Terence.

After her last interview with Terence Caja had withdrawn into herself like a beaten animal, almost mad with despair. The universal rejoicings, the deceitful favour the gods were showing to Terence, roused her out of her apathy; she felt that this illusive success was the beginning of the end.

She went to Varro. Her visit was not unwelcome to him. Now that the rule of his servant was assured for a few months ahead, he had leisure to examine the situation as a whole, particularly the dangers which might arise from the nature of the tool he had fashioned. It was not to be disregarded that the creature might be foolish enough to rebel against his creator in the intoxication of victory. It would be well to provide for such a contingency, and

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prepare a noose for the fellow to hang himself with if necessary. So Varro consented to see Caja.

The woman looked queer, half-mad. "What are you doing with my Terence?" she screamed at the Senator. "Didn't you do enough harm to him in Rome? Why do you keep on playing with him?" Varro listened calmly. "Of whom are you speaking, my good woman?" he asked. "Are you speaking of the Emperor Nero? Do you know that by rights I should have you whipped and afterwards put to death for using such words?" "Then put me to death!" screamed Caja. "Better that than having to look on while you're ruining him."

The Senator was surprised. "Then you don't believe," he asked, "that he is the Emperor Nero?" Caja gazed at him with hatred and said: "Don't try to come your tricks on me. You can't pull my leg." "Listen to me, my good Caja," the Senator said gravely. "I have known both you and Terence from the beginning, and I knew the Emperor Nero better than anyone else. Now," he went on, underlining every word, "your Terence knows things which nobody could possibly know except the Emperor Nero and myself." "Then a third person must have known them too," replied Caja stubbornly, "and my Terence must have got wind of them somehow. Don't treat me as if I were an idiot. It's impossible for a man like you to be taken in by my Terence." "Perhaps," Varro went on patiently, "perhaps the man who returned from the Palatine that night was the Emperor after all." "You don't believe that yourself," Caja retorted. "I know he was the same man, for he slept with me before that night and he slept with me after it, and he turned to me just the same way when he wanted me, and that was seldom enough; he had just the same tricks. How could the Emperor Nero know about things like that? Explain that to me, if you can. And here's another thing

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for you. On the morning after Nero died Terence told me not to lay out the shirt with the green mildewed spots : you'll hardly make me believe that Terence talked to the Emperor about that shirt the last night he spent at the Palatine. And Nero wouldn't have grumbled that there was too little garlic in the mutton stew, and it was the fourth time that month, for Nero couldn't have known anything about it."

"There seems to be something in that," Varro agreed after pretending to consider it for a while. "I must think it over. You will stay here in my house for the time being. I must have some more talks with you."

Caja said : "Promise me that no harm will come to him when it's all over. You were his protector once, I'll never forget that. If you promise me that, I'll stay in your house and do whatever you think right." Varro promised. He was glad to have the woman as a useful weapon if his creature ever showed signs of rebelling.

CHAPTER XLV

TWO MEN OF THE PEOPLE

THERE was another man who, strangely enough, began to have doubts of Nero's success just when the general enthusiasm was at its height. This was Knops. He knew the world, and his sharp nose told him when men and affairs were beginning to go bad. The same instinct that had made him trust the good luck of his master for so long, told him now that the zenith had been reached and Terence was ripe and beginning to go rotten.

It was fantastic enough and against all one's sense of the rightness of things to think that for several months now the potter had been accepted by the whole country as the Emperor, and that he had spread terror to the very gates of Rome. Knops could thank his stars that he had believed in that possibility and had staked his career on his belief. But now Terence's chariot was at the top of the ridge, and once it began to go downhill mightn't its descent become a plunge to destruction? A wise man would do well to get out in time with his winnings and put both in a place of safety. He thought of certain figures in the ancient legends who, trusting too arrogantly in their luck, became presumptuous and brought down upon them a fearful punishment; he thought of Niobe and Polycrates.

But Knops had savoured the sweetness of power;

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power was sweet, and very hard to give up. He could scent the danger, but he could not bring himself to renounce his power. He would wait for a little, a very little longer. He imposed a term upon himself. As soon as Nero captured Antioch he, Knops, would clear out.

For the time being the important thing was to secure his gains as far as possible. Through various agents he managed to put his money and goods in safety. Then he carried out his intentions regarding the girl Jalta. It all went as he had expected. He took Jalta to himself and slept with her. She pleased him. She was not coy ; his advances gave her pleasure and she did not conceal the fact. She was not sensitive or fastidious. Indeed she was almost coarse, but she liked him. He wanted to show her that he could be generous. Her father, his old friend Gorion, did not dare to say a word when he exhaustively praised her corporeal charms, but merely produced an embarrassed smile. But Knops clapped him affably on the shoulder and said with condescension : "Come, my old friend, I'll show you what kind of a man Knops is. I'll marry your Jalta."

The potter Gorion was filled with joy at this news. He was naturally vexed that Knops had won his bet and slept with his daughter. But that annoyance was small compared with the profit and honour which the union between Jalta and Knops brought him. And that Knops was actually going to marry the trollop transported Gorion to the seventh heaven of delight.

In his heart Knops was proud of the generosity he was showing in marrying Jalta, and he hoped that the gods would give him high marks for his honesty. Nor was he blind to the fact that his union with a daughter of the people must rouse still greater sympathy for him among the masses ; his quick wit had already made him popular with them.

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But the betrothal displeased one personage. Trebonius respected the native cunning of Knops and felt drawn to him, especially when he thought of the two foppish aristocrats ; yet he was deeply jealous of Knops and of his quick wit. He was not in the least afraid of him, and when he was drunk he would actually jeer at him. But that Knops should think of marrying such a common trollop seemed to the vain Trebonius, proud of his titles and his decorations, a reflection upon himself and a scandal to the whole Imperial Court. He resolved to speak his mind to Knops.

They were sitting in their favourite tavern. The low room was filled with a stench of cheap oil and garlic and the biting smoke from the fire ; the rudely carpentered tables were occupied by poor citizens and slaves ; the half-naked host was rushing busily from table to table. Knops was dressed simply, but Trebonius wore even here a goodly expanse of purple and a considerable amount of jingling metal. Knops and Trebonius drank.

Trebonius observed cuttingly that he could not understand a man like Knops throwing himself away like that. The time wasn't far distant when they would be entering Rome, and then they could have their choice of the daughters of the high nobility. There were some tasty morsels among them. Wealth and a great name and a groomed and tended body, the product of centuries of good breeding, were surely enough to inspire a man in bed and console him for all the hardships of life. Knops was ruining a marvellous chance, and quite needlessly. He might as well castrate himself, like a Syrian priest. To put it bluntly, Knops's betrothal was a deep disappointment to Trebonius, more, an insult.

Knops sent Trebonius a quick angry glance. He retorted that if a woman fulfilled the requirements he made upon her as a man of some experience, she had

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no need either of money or of a great name, and he was prepared to uphold that view against anybody. He couldn't say which of them was more fastidious in these matters, he or his friend Trebonius; but there was one thing he insisted upon absolutely: nobody should interfere in his affairs with women. He refused to have his taste called in question. He would marry whom he liked. And if he ever felt inclined to make up to some noble lady, he would bring it off in spite of being married to a woman of the people.

Knops drank, and Trebonius drank, and they stared at each other challengingly, measuring each other with hostile and fraternal eyes.

But soon their glances became more friendly. They were bound together by too many things: their vulgarity, their dependance on Nero. Trebonius drank, Knops drank. Trebonius still growled softly to himself; but soon that too ceased. They embraced each other, swore at each other, slept with the same women, were very friendly, and hated each other like poison.

CHAPTER XLVI

WHAT AN ARTIST

"WHAT an artist dies in me," was supposed to be the last sentence uttered by the Emperor Nero. "What an artist lives again in me," Nero-Terence was fond of saying to his intimates, and he seemed to be perfectly happy in the possession of his power and his genius. Yet despite his success he was not entirely happy. He felt sure of himself only when he appeared before the people and addressed them ; then, as he loved to say, employing a phrase from the classics, he was an Emperor to the very quick of his being. But with certain people, with Marcia, with Varro, with King Philip, he was still sometimes overcome by a feeling of inferiority. He was glad that Fronto at least was dead ; for Fronto too had occasionally worried him with a sense of his enormous presumption. But he dreaded most of all an approaching encounter which must take place sometime, his meeting with his royal ally Artaban. Of course he assured everybody as well as himself that he was looking forward to the meeting, and said how sorry he was that Artaban had already been forced to postpone it several times : he was involved in a tough struggle with his rival Pakor in the distant eastern borders of the Parthian Empire. But in secret Nero-Terence was relieved at the postponement. Deep within him he was afraid of the divine majesty to which

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the King of Kings had been born, of the light that radiated from him and was symbolically borne before him wherever he appeared. Nero-Terence was terrified lest his commonness should be unable to endure that light, lest the light should discover his nakedness.

Once he took his dangerous friend Varro aside. He seized him by the robe, copying Trebonius's habit, and lowering his voice told him confidentially: "Do you know, my Varro, I have made a curious discovery. I went to the labyrinth recently to see how I should have my burial chamber built. I wished to be alone, so I sent away the torch-bearer. It was quite dark, and then a strange thing happened." He brought his face quite near to Varro's, and lowered his voice yet more. "The cave," he whispered, "grew bright. The light came from my head; it was my divine majesty that lighted up the cave and made it bright." He did not dare to glance at Varro while he said this. For what should he do if Varro smiled? There would be no choice for him then except to kill Varro or else himself. But Varro did not smile. Varro was deeply alarmed.

Meanwhile the Emperor Nero happily and contentedly occupied his throne. His outward splendour had long since become habitual, and as it was already beginning to weary him he now wore a somewhat blasé expression, which made him still more like Nero. And when Varro did not smile at the story about the cave, Terence was filled with joy from head to foot.

Yes, Nero sunned himself in the favour of the gods. *Apollo had endowed him more richly than other mortals, Mars had given him the gift of victory in battle, Minerva had granted him good counsel in the person of his friend Varro, Hermes had enriched him with cunning in the wiles of his friend Knops.*

Sometimes, it was true, his advisers' reports were

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not all they might have been. For instance, they informed him that the people were giving ear to certain dark prognostications of John of Patmos, who had fled to the wilderness and from there was inciting them against the Emperor. The people were devoted to John, they called him the holy actor, and not at all in scorn ; for the Emperor, the saint and the actor were to them the highest of human beings. John's strange prophecies concerning the Anti-Christ, the beast which was about to appear or had already appeared in order to destroy the world, stirred the minds of the people and filled them with alarm. But Nero laughed ; he laughed at John of Patmos, the originator of these fables, and at his Christian God.

He laughed too when he heard that a great number of copies of *Octavia* were going round ; he laughed though in that work the atrocities of Nero were vividly described and it had been the occasion of his first public acclamation. These niggling fault-finders could not harm him ; since the night when Varro had not dared to smile, he had felt secure in the possession of his divine majesty. When Knops publicly burned all the copies of *Octavia* he could get hold of, along with other scandalous works, Nero thought that too much honour was being done to the wretched efforts of his opponents, and, certain now of his divine majesty, decided to permit himself an Imperial jest.

He invited his friends and counsellors of state to a recitation, and there declaimed the work of his enemy, the much-discussed *Octavia*.

He decided to refrain from caricaturing the play : that would be too cheap. With a faint, an almost imperceptible ironical intonation he thought the effect could be made much more striking ; a cool intellectual wit would be the key-note of the performance.

CHAPTER XLVII

CLAUDIA ACTE

ABOUT this time a rumour began to circulate that Claudia Acte, Nero's mistress, intended after long years of absence to visit her native Syria. The news roused much comment in Syria and Mesopotamia ; for Claudia Acte was one of the most talked-of figures in the Empire.

She was born a slave and had had a hard childhood. Her master trained her as an acrobat ; it was a rough school, and she had to endure hard words, blows and hunger. When she was nine the Imperial Court purchased the beautiful little girl from her master. Nero, himself very young at the time, saw her first when she was fifteen, and the passion which seized him then, and which was returned by her, survived all the storms of his life and his reign.

Acte was of medium height, delicate and robust at the same time. She had a pale, smooth, transparent complexion. Under her pure brow shone two clear, greenish-brown, inquisitive-looking eyes ; they were set wide apart and surmounted by beautifully shaped black eyebrows. Her mouth was somewhat large but beautifully formed ; her chin suggested self-will. Nero had praised Acte's beauty in a few fine poems, some of which had become popular, above all one which asserted that she was both child and woman, both chaste and passionate.

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he simply stared over Knops's head. And Knops saw that he had made a mistake.

How serious a mistake he was only to learn much later ; for Terence, and Knops should have known that, had a very good memory and never forgot a grudge.

Nero dismissed the audience and remained alone in the fine recitation hall. The servants, not knowing that the Emperor was still there, entered to extinguish the lights. They fled in terror from his gloomy looks. But he called them back and told them to do what they had come to do. So they extinguished the lights.

The Emperor was left alone on the stage in the darkness. He was wearing the white robes of the orator, a chaplet round his head ; his lower lip was fretfully pouted, he felt forsaken and misunderstood. What use was it to him that he possessed the divine majesty of an Emperor, that a great splendour went out from him and that radiance enveloped his head ? The dull world recognised him as a great Emperor, certainly ; but that he was something more, namely a great artist, it did not realise at all.

CHAPTER XLVII

CLAUDIA ACTE

ABOUT this time a rumour began to circulate that Claudia Acte, Nero's mistress, intended after long years of absence to visit her native Syria. The news roused much comment in Syria and Mesopotamia ; for Claudia Acte was one of the most talked-of figures in the Empire.

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Sometimes she would display her art before a small choice company of Nero's friends. Her art was a cross between acrobatics, pantomime and dance. Sometimes her face would assume a look of melancholy, evoked by memories of her childhood ; but her sadness vanished while she danced, and she forgot her fears. At such moments she became the child she had never been, and people forgot the intricate technique she had acquired with such hardship in her childish pleasure. One of her pantomimes, a trifle, a mere nothing, was particularly famous. In this she played the part of a child balancing a sort of reel on a cord ; the child was elated by her skill, and deeply troubled by her awkwardness. She caught the spinning disk on the cord, flung it high, caught it again, gravely and delicately, quite absorbed in her game, smiling crossly when she missed and blissfully when she succeeded. As she played she sang to herself in a small voice : "Spin on, my little reel. Are you glad when I make you spin ? Are you happy as you spin ? See how happy I am." Everybody in the Empire, even people who did not know a word of Greek, sang these childish verses ; no line of Homer's was so well-known.

Acte was the darling of Rome, the darling of the Empire. When the people saw the beautiful grave girl standing by the Emperor's side, and saw that he loved her as much as she him, they cheered the pair wildly and refused to believe in the atrocities with which Nero's enemies charged him. She had been the first woman to call the Emperor Red Beard, and the people adopted the endearing term. Claudia Acte walked through the blood and filth with which the empire of a world encumbered the Palatine, young and carefree, and in her serene presence the dark cruelties of history became unbelievable.

Nevertheless she made no pretension to be a stainless

virgin. She did not dissemble her curiosity regarding the happenings round about her and showed open interest in the scandal of Rome and Alexandria and Antioch. She was fond of making little malicious remarks and was ready to destroy a man or woman's reputation for the sake of a witticism. When she sat in the Emperor's box during the circus games she let herself go like the common people, shouted and bawled, and against all the rules of good manners bent forward greedily to watch the death struggles of the animals and men being slaughtered there ; and the people cheered her because she was like themselves. She was also moody like the people and she frankly gave way to her moods. Several times, while everybody round her in the circus was begging for a gladiator's life, she turned down her thumbs with a childlike smile and an untroubled brow, thus dooming the man to death.

The young girl was an astute business woman and proud of it. Her stewards had a bad hour if she ever caught them trying to cheat her. She built on a great scale, owned country estates, fine villas at Puteoli, at Veletrae, and kept a court of her own ; but she put away more money than she spent. She got Nero to convey to her the most profitable Imperial brick works, and partly by coaxing, partly by force, had most of the new public buildings erected with her bricks, for which she demanded an exorbitant price.

But Rome and the world were prepared to forgive anything to Claudia Acte. All the good that Nero did was ascribed to her, all the evil things that happened in his reign were done against her will. Nero had praised her as sweet and gay, calling her the wise and lovely child of the goddess of Rome ; and so Rome and the world regarded her.

She was courageous, and her love for Nero remained unshaken. When Nero died at the hands of the Senate

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she dauntlessly demanded his dead body from the new masters of Rome. At the risk of her life she threatened a virtual rebellion to achieve her end. They did not dare to refuse her the dead body of the Emperor. While everywhere Nero's busts and the various statues and monuments set up in his honour were being destroyed at the orders of the Senate, she ostentatiously erected a pyre for her Imperial lover on her estate in the Appian Way. She built it seven tiers high as became the pyre of an Emperor, and on the highest tier she set an eagle to bear the dead immortal to his kinsmen, the gods. To house the urn containing the ashes she built a mausoleum in the park of her estate.

She mourned him for half a year. Then she resumed her former life again and pursued it with her old childlike gaiety. Her friends claimed that her art had become still more perfect. She never appeared in public; but connoisseurs declared that she was still, at thirty-two, thirteen years after Nero's death, the finest acrobat in the Empire. The people cheered her wherever she appeared, and the Flavian Emperor did not dare to lay a finger on the privileges, decorations and honours she had accumulated.

And now Claudia Acte was coming to Syria to see her native land, on which she had not set foot since the days of her childhood.

CHAPTER XLVIII

CEJONIUS AND THE INCALCULABLE

HER visit was not exactly welcome to the Roman Governor. Even in Rome Cejonius had felt her as a disturbing element, a hostile principle, a being in every way opposed to him. The effortlessness with which she achieved whatever she liked, her divine lightness, seemed to mock at his strenuous and severe nature. Since they had heard of her arrival the people of Antioch had begun to sing again that silly old song about the reel ; it had enraged him in Rome long ago. Everyone sang it, his slaves and clerks, boys in the street, Romans, Syrians, Greeks ; it was like mockery in his ears. For he was the reel that was kept spinning, and this impudent song asked him to be glad of the fact.

He would have preferred not to trouble his head about Claudia Acte at all. But that was out of the question. The Palatine had suggested that when Acte called on him in Antioch he should try to win her over as chief witness against the traitor Terence. But how was he to manage that ? It was possible that this woman who had once loved the real Nero might help him to expose the fraudulent one. But who could read the heart of a girl who had invented that mad song about the reel ?

Acte accepted his invitation. He received her with

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every mark of honour, and when she reached his room she scrutinised with her quick inquisitive eye its somewhat stiff ostentation, and laughed her world-famed gay and careless laugh. Cejonius asked her the usual conventional questions, how long it was since she had seen her native country, what she thought of Antioch now, and how long she thought of staying. She replied in a friendly tone, smiling at him, and then said, her smile deepening: "And now, my Cejonius, ask me what you have been dying to ask me ever since you heard I was coming."

A little taken aback but also relieved by her unceremonious request, the Governor pretended at first he did not know what she meant. Then he admitted that he had been wondering whether she intended to cross the frontier and have a look at this so-called Nero: for no doubt she had been invited there. "Yes, I have been invited," she said, nodding gravely, and then she went on: "What do you advise, my Cejonius? I don't know myself yet whether I should accept or not. I feel curious about this man, I must confess, and I almost think I should pay him a visit." But the light and casual way in which she said this saddened Cejonius more than if she had announced she was going to join forces with the traitor: for then he would have been in a position to threaten her, perhaps even forbid her. To issue commands to a light-natured creature whom one could not control was ridiculous.

"I must advise you against proceeding to Mesopotamia, my Acte," he said at last somewhat formally. "The mere fact of your visiting the man will be interpreted by our enemies as a proof that you believe it possible that Nero is still alive, and that you consider this fellow to be Nero. Wouldn't it be disloyalty to the Emperor Titus to give grounds for such an assumption? For nobody knows better than you that Nero is not alive." He

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had involuntarily drawn himself erect; it was a dry old soldier who sat there, and Acte suddenly realised why people called him Jumping Jack. She got up and leant against the end of the couch where she had been sitting. But when Cejonius stiffly made to rise too—it was not seemly to remain sitting in the presence of a lady—she lightly but vigorously pushed him back into his chair, gazed into the little man's furrowed face, and said smilingly: "You forget, my Cejonius, that I am an inquisitive woman. When five million people say that a man is the Emperor Nero, don't you think the mistress of Nero has a right to look him over?"

"No," growled Cejonius. "I don't think so," he added more courteously. "I don't think that she has that right before the gods, the Emperor, the Senate and the people of Rome." He sat stiffly, scraping the palm of one hand with the finger-tips of the other.

Acte subsided on her couch again; she did not sit on it, for she did not like sitting, she reclined with her legs drawn up under her. "I have never been afraid," she replied, "of the Emperor and the Senate. The people can hardly have any objection to my looking at this supposed Nero, indeed they probably wish it, and the gods can certainly have nothing against it. So the only question that remains is: How would the Roman Governor regard such a visit? What would you really do, my Cejonius, if I decided on it?" "I don't know yet," the Governor replied stiffly. "Possibly I would try to prevent you." "By force?" Acte enquired with interest, smiling broadly. "If I decided to prevent you," replied Cejonius, "then I might go the length even of employing force." At this Acte burst out laughing. "You're a brave man," she said. "But with your permission we'll continue this conversation some other time. For I must lie down now for a couple of hours. The Empress Poppaea when

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she travelled about always took a herd of she-asses with her, so that she might wash her face in their milk every night. I take two hours' siesta instead. But I simply must have them. Don't forget that I'm thirty-two. Till later then, my Cejonius."

The Governor replied to her visit that same evening. Young and sure of herself, she sat opposite her broken and beaten enemy. If he had boasted as he had done that morning, she would simply have laughed in his face. But a little of her charm had touched even him, so that now he had a vague idea of her power. Accordingly he decided to trust her without reserve, instead of uselessly threatening her, and confess the worries that were troubling him.

In cautious terms, for he did not wish to say anything that reflected on the memory of her Emperor, he explained that Nero's policy had been great in conception but contrary to good sense. It was Utopian to think of fitting the corrupt and unstable East into the measured framework of the Empire. Rome could not possibly digest more of the East than it had already swallowed. And even if she disapproved of the Western policy of the Flavians, was there the slightest prospect of making the Neronian idea prevail to-day? If a vigorous expansive Eastern policy miscarried when Rome undertook it with the whole organisation of the state at its back, how could it expect to succeed now, pursued here at the outskirts of the Empire with the most inadequate means? No, it would be hopeless even if a great man were to attempt it, instead of this wretched slave. It would bring nothing but untold misfortune. "I appeal to your reason, my Acte," said the Governor with unusual energy, "I appeal to your world-famed good sense. You can make a splash in politics by intoxicating the populace, but only for a short time. Nero was certainly a more brilliant, and if

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you like a greater man than old Vespasian with his peasant caution. But Nero left behind him forty milliards of liabilities and Vespasian seventeen million of assets. Now that after years of hard work the East is more or less pacified again, to start a Neronian policy may inflict some damage on Nero's enemies for a few months : but it doesn't matter who attempts Nero's policy to-day, he is bound to lose in the end." And he admitted sadly, lowering his head : "On one trifling point I have yielded to personal passion instead of following reason, and that one small deviation from the straight line may have been indirectly responsible for this senseless adventure in Mesopotamia. Be warned in time, my Acte, and listen to me. Our age is inclined to go out for a fine intoxication, and intoxication is extremely tempting. But if Roman civilisation is not to go under we must return to reason at last, all of us, and confine intoxication to private life and art. In politics there is no place for it."

Acte listened quietly and gravely. Perhaps the man was right. But what was that to her ? She had nothing to do with politics. She simply wanted to see this strange Nero ; when she had seen him she would decide. Was she to have no private life of her own ? Politics, good sense, that was all very well. But if one couldn't have an hour of intoxication now and then, good sense had no point. If you asked yourself what made life worth living, the answer was a few hours of intoxication. But there was no sense in explaining that to this poor worried man ; he would never understand.

She had loved Nero. Nero had overreached himself. Many people maintained that the things he did and the way he lived proved he was mad, and the opinion of these rational people had been cruelly confirmed by experience. But was it not that very madness of his, that extravagantly arrogant majesty, that aping of the divine, that

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radiant power, which had won all hearts for him? One could respect reason; but one could love only that other thing, that radiance, that intoxication, as the wretched man Cejonius called it. She had loved Nero for the sake of that intoxication. She still loved him for its sake. His whole policy, his whole life, might have been either false or true, but it was certainly great and worthy of love. Everything in him was worthy of love, his godlike ambition, his vanity, his ruthlessness, his splendour, his smile, his pouting sensual lips, his grey eyes, now bored, now shining with rapture, his smooth soft skin. She loved him for the inordinate desire which drove him to interrupt a banquet or a meeting of the Senate at any moment because at that moment he wished to make love to her. And the very extravagance of his plans, their grandeur, their contempt for difficulties, their pure irrationality—she loved him for all these things.

Acte was not a prude, and she had not played the vestal since Nero's death. In her circle of friends there was a poet called Italicus, who wrote verses as hard and pure as marble, and he made love to her more constantly and sensitively than Nero had ever done. He possessed many other praiseworthy qualities as well, good sense, culture, poetry, even humour. He was good company at table and in bed, and it flattered her to think that this man of the world, who was accounted one of the best poets of the age, perhaps the best of all, was madly in love with her. Many people could not understand why she did not respond to the man's passion. Yet it was quite simple: the living poet could not stand comparison with the dead Nero. When she thought of Nero's eyes, his voice now cold as steel and now like the whisper of a child, when she stood in his mausoleum and called up her dead lover before her, then, although he had been ashes for thirteen years, every other man became a mere shadow.

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And even now, though she almost pitied that wretched, destitute advocate of reason sitting before her, she was violently overcome again by her memory of the dead man. A great temptation blazed up in her, drowning her caution, a great longing to see this man whom so many people took for Nero. If he possessed anything of Nero at all, his voice, his hands, his walk, if he possessed even a grain of that indescribable mixture of greatness, folly, majesty and childishness, what a comfort it would be.

"Perhaps he is Nero," she said. She spoke as if to herself, dreamily, with the same tiny, self-satisfied, equivocal smile with which she had condemned some gladiator who gazed up at her for mercy. "Have no fear, my Cejonius," she went on, smiling more deeply, when the other started back and turned pale at such extreme unreason and ill-will. "I have no wish to revenge myself on anyone, either on your Titus or on the senators who hounded my lover to his death. And I know that Nero is dead, I have seen his dead body and the black hole in his throat where his life left him; I myself burned his body, and his ashes are safe in an urn in my estate in Rome. But I may fall in love with this other one, and in that case he will be Nero to me."

She uttered this nonsense in a careless voice, and she gazed at him with her clear, untroubled eyes. Cejonius was seized with shuddering dread at a world in which folly openly triumphed, and where there was no room for reason. He still had his seven Roman legions, but he realised with dismay that in spite of that he was powerless. What could his soldiers do against this woman's smile and her insane whims? For weeks, for months the fate of his province was given into the hands of this courtesan, this child.

He could do nothing against her. She was like the

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river Euphrates, indifferent and incalculable; nobody could foresee what she would bring, blessings or misfortune. It was senseless to oppose her. He could only sit still and wait for what she chose to do.

And he scarcely felt angry with her when two days later she set out for Mesopotamia.

CHAPTER XLIX

SPIN ON, REEL

ACTE and Varro met in Edessa. They had not seen each other for almost thirteen years. He gazed at her delicate face, and decided that it was a little more resigned, a little more experienced. She had often been jealous of him as the most intimate friend of her lover ; he had robbed her frequently of Nero's attention and devotion. But now that she saw his face, that powerful face with the intelligent eyes, the finely formed brow, she realised how closely they were bound together by common memories. They had known the Emperor better than any other two people, and loved him more. She had such a vivid picture of Nero, and saw his image so palpably before her, that she turned pale. She was a little shocked to notice how Varro had aged. In reality he was amazingly young for his fifty years ; but she had carried in her mind unchanged a picture of him as he had been, and so she saw the new lines in his face with painful clarity.

"So we meet again, my Varro," she said, and her face, which reflected the subtlest shades of feeling, reflected joy, disappointment and resignation. But Varro was thinking : "Why did I never make love to this woman ? I had experience enough and a good pair of eyes. Why didn't they tell me how beautiful she was ? I kept myself from loving her out of prudence. Am I in love with her

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now? A few months ago I would have given up this whole ridiculous gamble for her, I would have courted her, won her, and lived with her for a couple of years, or perhaps even five. Now this stupid business has sucked away all my energy. I am empty and exhausted; yes, I am an old man now."

But no trace of these thoughts could be seen in his face or heard in his words. "Let me have a look at you, my Acte," he said jestingly. "Your teeth have actually grown still smaller and still lovelier." They had often joked about Acte's small regular teeth, and half in jest, half in earnest, Varro had held that such small teeth made her look silly. "Whether my teeth have grown bigger or not I don't know," said Acte, "but I have grown wiser. That is past all doubt. Have you, my Varro?" She tried to summon up a smile, but did not succeed. She was stirred by memories of the time when the three of them, Nero, Varro and she, had jested and quarrelled with each other, sometimes idly, but at other times in complete earnest.

She was vexed at her own sentimentality. "Tell me," she hastily begged him. "What's this that you have been doing? Why did you start all this hubbub over your Nero? What do you expect to get out of it? You must explain everything to me quite clearly. You know that I'm frightfully inquisitive." She was reclining on the sofa with one naked arm under her head; her bright blue dress was spread in wide folds on either side of her. Her brow was exposed, her fine black hair fell in ringlets over her shoulders against the prevalent fashion.

Varro did as she commanded him. He did not conceal the fact that the immediate occasion of his adventure had been his antipathy to Cejonius. He told his story lightly and amusingly; nevertheless she could feel through his words the intensity of his passion and

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his burning faith in the idea he was serving. He spoke of the sacrifices he had made, of his daughter Marcia, his friend Fronto, of what he had given up in the way of money, time, tranquillity and leisure, and added that he regretted nothing.

Acte listened thoughtfully. "You have given me many reasons," she said at last, "but only reasons of passion, unfortunately." "Unfortunately?" Varro retorted. "You actually said unfortunately?" And they gazed amiably and yet enquiringly at each other to discover how far their past bound them together, and how far their present divided them.

"Someone demonstrated to me in Antioch with the most excellent arguments," said Acte, "that your undertaking is foolish and hopeless. The man who did this is of no importance and thoroughly unsympathetic to me, but he has reason on his side." "Reason," said Varro, shrugging his shoulders, and his face assumed that charming levity of expression which had so often proved irresistible. "Spin on, reel," he quoted with a laugh. "What is reason? Everybody calls what justifies his own being reasonable, and rejects as unreasonable what is contrary to it. I have created this Nero because I could not live without Nero and his ideas. You once loved Nero in your woman's way, Acte, and you love him still; you paid him the last burial honours and you revere his memory. I too loved him in my way; I am continuing his work. Is that unreasonable?" "Ah, Varro," said Acte, "I've often hated you. But I know how much you loved Red Beard and how much he loved you." "I love him still, Acte," said Varro. And they looked at one another gravely.

CHAPTER L

MADNESS

WITH joyful surprise Varro realised that Acte's arrival had effected a change for the better in his daughter. She had remained inaccessible and to all appearances deranged since Fronto's death, but now she suddenly began to speak to him again. She always turned the conversation on Claudia Acte, and showed a curious unwillingness to be parted from her theme. She could not hear enough of Acte, and demanded to know a thousand little details about her. She declared that they could not let such a distinguished guest remain in Edessa in private lodgings, and as the Emperor was absent from his palace and still touring the newly captured towns, she suggested that she and her father should offer hospitality to their famous and charming visitor. The astonished Varro hesitated and advised against the step. He could not understand what attraction Acte could have for Marcia. But Marcia insisted and he had to give way.

The explanation of this was that Marcia saw in Acte and Acte's fate a reflection of her own. For this woman the real Nero was dead and now she had come to the East, perfectly willing to put up with the false one. For Marcia too the real Nero was dead ; Fronto and he had melted indissolubly into one in her mind, so that with

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Fronto she had lost the dead Emperor. For both Acte and herself only the empty sheath of Nero now remained.

Acte on her side felt strangely interested in Marcia. In Rome and Antioch all kinds of scandal was going about regarding the proud aristocratic girl whom a strange fate had forced to become the wife of a slave who played at being the Emperor. Rumours of the man's impotence too had actually crossed the sea, and whispers of Marcia's relations with Fronto. Acte was therefore curious to see Marcia.

She had always got on excellently with both of Nero's wives, first with Octavia, later with Poppaea. The superb shamelessness with which she had upheld her position at Nero's side, the way in which she had kept him, amiably accepting his wives and surviving them, had helped to increase her popularity. The people loved her for the foolhardiness of her passion and her contempt for external dignity; they were charmed by her wantonness in preferring to be known as Nero's mistress, and in remaining his mistress when she could have been Empress, if she liked. And now she had come to have a look at the wife of this new Nero, resolved to get on with her as she had got on with the other two women.

Acte spoke to her quite freely. She saw at once from Marcia's somewhat extravagant airs of condescension and amiability how deeply her loss had deranged her mind and driven her in upon herself. She soon realised that it would not be easy to make Marcia her friend; but the challenge appealed to her and she redoubled her charm. She put private questions to Marcia as one woman to another, but without being importunate, and thus gradually loosened her defences. Marcia looked down upon Acte as a slave by birth. Yet had not her husband, himself a slave, risen to be Emperor, and if the Emperor

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Nero and the dead Fronto were profoundly involved with the living Terence; she could no longer separate the three pictures. Confidentially she told the astonished Acte of Nero's fondness for using filthy and indecent words when he was making love. She said Nero, but she thought Fronto. The fact that Nero as a born slave had a sort of right, indeed almost an obligation, to use filthy terms in moments of deep feeling, made Fronto still more desirable in her eyes. The fact that Nero-Terence was the Emperor was sufficient to elevate Fronto to Imperial rank; the living man and the dead became one.

At these moments both women saw a picture of a man worthy of their entire love; they embellished it with the charming qualities of countless men, and they called that picture Nero.

And by virtue of that picture the half-mad Marcia and the wise and vigilant Acte came to know each other's deepest feelings. As if Marcia could guess all this she suddenly said one day: "It isn't true that Nero died. He's still alive. But if you want to feel him, you mustn't look too closely at our present Nero. I know a place where you can find the real Nero, I mean his spirit, his idea." And Acte realised that Marcia employed the term idea in the platonic sense, that she meant the ideal and indestructible image of Nero which they both carried in their hearts.

"And where, my Marcia," she asked, deeply moved by these strange words, "where shall I find the true Nero?" Marcia put her finger to her lips with a secret and significant air and whispered: "In the labyrinth, dear. He is hiding in the labyrinth. If you think of him very hard, if you call on him with your whole soul, you can summon him, he will appear, he will whisper to you again those horrible, common and lovely names which he

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used to whisper to us when he was alive. Dear sister, will you go with me to the labyrinth and listen to him and see him?" she asked pleadingly.

And Acte, carried away by the other woman's passion, answered, lowering her voice: "Yes, dear, take me there sometime."

CHAPTER LI

TWO DISAPPOINTED MEN

KNOPS in Edessa and Trebonius in Samosata looked forward with thrilled expectation to the arrival of Acte. They considered they knew how to treat women, they were convinced of their masculine adequacy, and much experience had given them confidence. To sleep with a woman whose charms were world-famous seemed to them an object worthy of a supreme effort.

Knops regarded himself as the Emperor's Viceroy in Edessa and was accordingly the first to pay his respects. He began by deploying the impudent charms by which, even as a slave, he had so often conquered women's hearts. But Acte remained quite cool and friendly. She regarded Knops with curiosity, but clearly without cordiality. Knops, provoked by her distant politeness, began to brag of his abilities. He held up his genius as a statesman for her admiration. He cynically divulged that the inundation of Apamea had been his inspiration, an inspiration which had made possible Nero's triumph. But the mention of that triumph seemed merely to sadden Acte. Nero had not worried very much when, in spite of his innocence, he was popularly credited with starting the fire that consumed Rome, but she, Acte, had been wounded to the heart by that stupid libel disseminated by his enemies, and she was by no means pleased that the old scandal should be

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revived again by the provincial cunning of this man and his fine idea of destroying Apamea by water. So she nodded non-committally but amiably. "It needs," she remarked thoughtfully, "a considerable degree of brazenness to start such troubles. A man who makes the stupidity of the mob his trump card can certainly count on a momentary success. But I am curious to see how long the people will let themselves be fooled, and if you'll win all you want to win by fooling them. And now I must thank you for an interesting talk," she said. "My rest hour has come and I must leave you." And with that she dismissed him courteously but firmly. Knops found himself outside her door with his hopes disappointed, and there was little comfort in assuring himself that that whore Acte was merely a pretentious, affected, middle-aged Oriental.

Trebonius actually journeyed from Samosata to Edessa to lay his homage before Claudia Acte. He appeared with all his decorations rattling about him and from the start put up a better show than Knops. He bragged, praised Acte's beauty in loud and unequivocal terms, laughed his famous loud laugh, and produced his most spicy jokes. Acte contemplated with interest this loud and noisy phenomenon; she had never seen anything like it before. She put out her hand to touch his decorations, got him to tell her the story of how he won the mural crown, and spent an exciting half-hour in his company. But then, just when he thought he had reached his goal and had seized her round the shoulders with a powerful grip, saying: "Well, how do you think the two of us would get on together, little woman?" she started back without any sign of anger but in such measureless astonishment that he too had to give up all hope.

That evening in their tavern Knops and Trebonius

TWO DISAPPOINTED MEN

told each other their experiences with Claudia Acte. These experiences had changed considerably in their imaginations. They both declared that Acte had made advances to them ; but for such a worn old hack she was a bit exacting, and her demands were greater than any enjoyment that might be expected from complying with them. Busy men like themselves simply hadn't the time for such an affected old trot.

They agreed about this with one voice. The people sitting round listened reverentially to the words of these great and popular personages and diligently passed them on.

CHAPTER LII

RISEN FROM THE DEAD

WHEN Terence learned that Claudia Acte had come to Mesopotamia to visit him, he did not curtail his tour through the newly conquered towns. He dreaded meeting Acte. It showed goodwill to him, certainly, this visit of hers. Nevertheless he looked forward to their meeting with somewhat the same feelings as he had looked forward to his wedding night with Marcia. Acte had known Nero better than anybody else in the world. Nero was considered the most masculine of men, and Acte, if anyone, must know that he bore that reputation with justice.

But, he comforted himself, was he not Nero? Had he not become Nero from head to foot, so that his actions must necessarily be the actions of Nero? If Terence's masculinity was not roused by Acte, that would simply prove that Nero had lost his taste for her. This idea roused his courage again.

He considered it more in accordance with his dignity that Acte should come to Samosata than that he himself should go to Edessa. Acte was surprised. Would the real Nero have acted like that? Probably not. Yet he had been incalculable. No one could say with certainty that he would have done this or that he would not have done that. For a moment she hesitated whether to go

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to Samosata. She told Marcia of the Emperor's invitation and did not conceal her doubts. Marcia enquired confidentially: "Shall I come with you, dear sister?" And when Acte made no reply, Marcia gave in and contented herself with remarking: "Come back soon. Then I'll show you the labyrinth." She had said nothing more about the labyrinth since that first mention of it.

So Acte travelled alone to Samosata. She looked forward with tormenting and blissful expectation and an excitement which she had not felt for years to her meeting with the man. On the morning of his visit she walked through her rooms and decked them in honour of the true Nero; she was tormented by expectation. For the hundredth time she tried to picture what the real Nero would do if he were to meet her again in such circumstances after such a long absence. He would laugh boyishly and good-humouredly, walk up quite close to her, his nose twitching as if he were drinking in her fragrance; he would peer at her face with his grey short-sighted eyes, stare at her fixedly, and then seize her with his fleshy hands, laughing, his face radiant, stammering out a few words in Greek. Then he would fall silent, perhaps he would be panting a little, for he was short of breath, and thereupon he would take her by both hands, press them firmly, and say: "Good morning, Acte. Good morning, little Acte." Yes, that was what he would call her, although he was no taller than she was.

A hubbub outside, shouts of command, the clashing of weapons. Footsteps on the stairs. A footstep known to her. Open the doors. The new man is coming. No, he wasn't a stranger; it was Nero who entered the room. That was his face, that his wide brow, his reddish fair hair, his grey, puckered, short-sighted eyes, his large, childish, pouting lower lip. He went up to her, he laughed boyishly and good-humouredly, he walked up quite close to her,

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stared at her, seized her with his white fleshy hands, and his face beamed. And then, then the voice of Nero spoke, stammering out a few words in Greek. Could it be his voice? Yet how curiously he pronounced the *th*. No, she mustn't find fault now, mustn't criticise, mustn't carp. She wanted it to be his voice. It was his voice. And then the voice was saying in Latin: "Good morning, Acte. Good morning, my dear Acte."

Acte's face had grown as white as one of her own statues. Almost fainting she submitted to the boyishly ardent fondlings of the stranger. Could it be possible? She had seen the hole in Nero's throat from which his life had run, she had helped to wash his dead body, had kissed it, had stood by while they laid it upon the pyre and it was burned to ashes, and these ashes were preserved in the mausoleum in her park in Rome. And now the man was here, his short-sighted eyes, his impudent, boyish, sensual, royal lips. Everything about him was fuller, heavier, stouter, for thirteen years had passed. But it was his face and his body. Could the gods have fashioned the same image twice? Naturally she knew of the jest which Nero had had with the potter Terence in Rome, and her over-wakeful senses recognised at once the false *th*, and every other slight deviation. Nevertheless she was moved to the depths of her being, overwhelmed with bliss and despair. The room was filled with her lover Nero, his hands had touched her just like this, she had felt his breath in her face just like this. But if this were true, could the dead man still be hers? Terror and joy shook her so that she almost fell.

She told herself to waken up. She told herself that it was possible for a body, a face, a mask to repeat itself, but if she looked closely she would discover that the movements, the walk of this man, were different, that his ways were not those of her dead lover. Yet she did not

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want to believe this, for the time being at least. She calmly freed herself from the man's arms. In a tender voice, but still pale with excitement, she said: "And where have you been all this time? Why have you never sent for me?"

Terence was prepared for such questions and had drawn up answers in the genuine Neronian style. But being a thorough actor, he had flung all his heart into the moment of greeting, had exhausted himself in that moment, so that now he felt quite empty. Naturally he had sufficient technique to bring out the proper answers in the proper tone. But the answers were lifeless. Acte came to herself and saw before her a wretched comedian. She felt towards him now as she had felt towards a bird she had once kept; after it died she had had it stuffed and it had stood in her rooms, a melancholy, dumb effigy. The charm was broken. She was deeply ashamed now of her great and rapturous moment. Nevertheless she felt grateful to the man for that moment and did not let him mark her disappointment.

Everything considered, this first interview went off so well that even a skilled witness might have mistaken it for a meeting between the true Nero and his mistress. But Acte was glad that the man did not stay long. Afterwards she was quite exhausted and lay down to rest according to her usual custom. She had formed a habit of sleeping two hours even when she was upset, and so she slept to-day. But in her dreams she had wild distorted visions of Nero, and she awoke more exhausted than when she had lain down.

That day Acte felt for the first time that she was growing old.

She could feel again Nero's hands clasping her head. Her skin quivered beneath his breath, her ears were filled with his voice. With whose voice? That of the real or

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of the false Nero? Wasn't it immaterial what name the man bore? Wasn't it enough that he was alive? Wasn't it a supreme, unimaginable gift from the gods? She made up her mind to accept the man as Nero, whoever he might be, with open eyes and a full knowledge of what she was doing. And if she felt repelled, that was merely because the man seemed to be coarser than she remembered him; and if her mind sneered at her for being taken in by him, her blood still yearned for him.

On the evening of that day Nero gave a banquet in her honour. For some time he sat lifelessly at the table, then the inspiration of the great actor suddenly descended upon him. Exalted by that moment, she waited for him, the true Nero, to shout at the other guests and send them away and make love to her. But he disappointed her. After a decent interval he courteously took leave of her and went.

And the same thing happened on the second and the third visit. Then she asked him with the natural shamelessness of a loving woman: "When are you going to sleep with me, Red Beard?" But he was prepared for that question too and retorted laughingly: "One mustn't steal too much happiness from the gods. I have sworn a vow that I shall control myself and not lie with you until I have conquered Antioch." At that she recognised how truly he was a stranger to her and how different he was from Nero.

She decided to return to Edessa and from there proceed by way of Antioch to Rome. But she found it unexpectedly hard to part from the man. So she stayed on, first for a day and then for another day and then for a week and then for another week.

CHAPTER LIII

THE LABYRINTH

ALTHOUGH Nero was a simple man, and also shut in upon himself, he was clever at guessing what the people round him were feeling and particularly what they were feeling about himself. He knew perfectly well how Acte regarded him. He was particularly anxious to make a good show before her. He knew that Acte, in spite of her sensible and calculating nature, was moved most deeply by him when he played the romantic dreamer. So one day he asked her to go with him and see the place he loved most in all Mesopotamia, the labyrinth of Edessa.

Acte was deeply impressed. When Marcia spoke to her of the labyrinth she had assumed that it was a mere fantasy of a sick brain, and that the second Nero had nothing to do with it; nevertheless Marcia's words had filled her with an awed curiosity. Now that Nero-Terence himself brought up the labyrinth she felt that agitation anew, and the word labyrinth, pronounced in Nero's impressive tones, seemed to breathe out an uncanny and awful mystery.

She travelled back to Edessa in Nero's escort. She did not conceal from Marcia that Nero had asked her to visit the labyrinth with him. But Marcia did not seem to be offended and Nero did not seem to mind Marcia's accompanying them.

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So the three of them left the city, crossed the Skirtos and entered the labyrinth. They were dressed unobtrusively and had no escort: Nero did not want to rouse the people's notice. With one solitary torch-bearer they made their way into the dark maze of caves. Nero knew his way perfectly down there. He walked in front at a good round pace and paid no attention to the torch-bearer, so that Marcia and Acte found it hard work to follow him over the winding and uneven paths. At last he ordered the torch-bearer to fall behind. "Don't be afraid," he said to the women, and he told Marcia to take his hand and Acte to take Marcia's, and went on through the dark passages.

Acte was brave, as she had often proved before; yet she felt acute discomfort as she followed these two half-mad people through the narrow, low-roofed, mouldering galleries, keeping her head bent so as not to strike it against the roof. She could see nothing, but now and then she could hear little shrill discordant cries. "These are the bats," Nero explained. "I have tamed some of them; they have interesting faces. And you needn't be afraid, my Acte, they won't stick in your hair. That's a silly superstition. The world is full of silly superstitions, unfortunately," he sighed, and then gave a little laugh.

"Ah," he went on in a satisfied voice, "now we are coming to my favourite spot. The path descends here for a few steps, it's almost like a little flight of stairs." Marcia and Acte laboriously felt their way down; his voice was now their only guide. The stuffy air and the almost palpable darkness closed in upon Acte. "Now we have arrived," came Nero's voice through the darkness. "Do sit down," he said politely, as if they were in his room in the palace. Marcia had let Acte's hand go, Acte longed to be with her so as to have the comfort of her presence and feel the warmth of her body, but she could

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not find Marcia and she was afraid to call her while Nero was there. So she squatted down where she was.

"Can you see me, my Acte?" said Nero after a while. His voice now came from her left and seemed to be some distance away; the chamber into which he had led her appeared to be a large one. "No," replied Acte in astonishment. "How should I see you? It's dark here." "Is it dark?" Nero asked. "Well, then I shall illumine it," he announced grandly. "Do you see me now?" he asked in malicious triumph and with a hint of menace. As she remained silent, Marcia answered instead: "Of course I see you." "She must speak for herself," insisted Nero. "Yes, of course I can see you," said Acte awkwardly. "Can you see me raising my hand?" asked Nero. "Yes, I see," replied Acte. "You're joking," laughed Nero. "I didn't raise my hand at all. But this is a place that lends itself to jokes. I always feel well here. Yes, I feel so well here that I intend to stay here for all time. It's the place that suits me best. The shades of the great old Eastern kings walk here. This is where they are buried, this is where they wanted to be buried, and when I want to talk with my equals I come here and hold long conversations with the old kings and the gods."

Acte made no reply. Her dejection grew. The man was clearly out of his wits, and perhaps he might do something to her in his madness, sacrifice her to a god or to his genius or to the bull-god Labyr, the god of the labyrinth. Nevertheless his voice and what he had said impressed her deeply. For the real Nero might well have spoken somewhat like that.

After a while Nero said: "Now we'll go back," and Acte breathed freely again, but then he added: "I shan't take your hand on the way back. I prefer to light your way." Acte went rigid with terror. She got up and

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felt her way along the uneven walls. Already Nero's voice seemed to be quite far away and to come from above her; he must have left the chamber. Chattering merrily to himself, he went on, and presently his voice fell silent. But Marcia at least remained. "Let us stick together," she suggested comfortingly. "Isn't it lovely here?" "Yes, yes," said Acte, and she seized Marcia's hand. Vaguely she remembered stories of people who had got lost in the labyrinth and never found their way out again, who had starved and died there. She gripped Marcia's hand more tightly. But presently Marcia needed both her hands to feel her way in the darkness, and in a few seconds she too was gone. Acte shouted and Marcia replied, but soon her voice also fell silent.

So now Acte was alone in the labyrinth. She felt her way onwards. At last she reached a long, fairly even passage. She remembered quite clearly having come along it just after Nero-Terence ordered the torch-bearer to stay behind. She told herself not to lose courage: in a few minutes she would see the torch shining in front of her. But no glimmer of light came, and the voices of Nero and Marcia had fallen quite silent.

There was no sense in going on. Her memory had deceived her; she was lost. Nothing remained but to wait for the others to come back for her.

She cowered in the darkness on the cold ground. She would need all her patience. They might keep her waiting for an hour at least, perhaps for two or three. Perhaps Red Beard had decided to pay her out, because he had failed in front of her. Acte knew the world, she knew that men hate most deeply those who have witnessed their failure. The labyrinth was supposed to have three thousand chambers. Why had she let herself be decoyed into this silly adventure, why had she come down here

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with these two mad people? She was usually sensible enough. Why had she come here at all? Of course there must have been some point in her coming here, but now she could not think what it could have been. She could not find her way among her own thoughts any more than she could find it in this accursed labyrinth.

"Must be sensible. Come, Acte, don't let yourself be frightened. What interest can the man have in leaving you here in the darkness? And if he should have such a mad idea, Varro and the others will soon make him see sense. For it would be a great blow to Nero's cause if Acte were to vanish while she was paying him a visit."

She suddenly snatched at her hair in terror. Was that a bat that had got caught in it? Nonsense. In the innermost chamber was the shrine of the god of the labyrinth, the bull-god Labyr. He had forced the people of Edessa to send young boys and girls down to him so that he might feed on their flesh and drink their blood. How long would she have to sit here? "Red Beard," she cried suddenly, her voice filled with terror. "Where are you? Come and help me."

And all of a sudden Nero's voice came to her. "Are you still here, Acte?" he asked courteously, and in great surprise. He spoke into the darkness as casually as if he were staring at her through his emerald. "Why didn't you follow me? But perhaps you are right; the radiance of majesty is too precious to be used for menial purposes. I'll send the torch-bearer for you."

The torch-bearer came and the light with him, and at last she found herself out in the sunshine again. The terrors she had felt in the labyrinth did not remain long in her mind. She remembered only what had impressed her most while she was there. The Nero of the labyrinth

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who had moved her so deeply, who had filled her with such terror, who had saved her, was the real Nero. The real Nero was as much at home in the labyrinth as in his mausoleum in her park. And now she knew with certainty that she had been right in coming to Mesopotamia.

CHAPTER LIV

OUT OF THE TOMB

SHE had now been almost a month in Edessa. Nero's friends decided that her visit had been all to the good; yet if she did not testify to the identity of Nero in some striking way her visit might yet bring more harm than advantage. They unanimously agreed that there was only one way in which she could really witness to Nero's genuineness.

It was natural that Varro should be entrusted with the task of persuading her. "I see with joy, dear Acte," he said, "that you are a great deal with our Nero. Are you beginning to understand now how I hit on my mad plan of bringing Nero to life again?" Acte listened to him with the expression of an attentive child, and nodded reflectively. "If our Nero," Varro continued, "can transport even you, my Acte, into the past, couldn't he transport Rome even more easily, for Rome is much less intelligent?" "The times," Acte replied, "have grown hard and cold. Very strong means are needed to rouse the people. Perhaps our infatuation for Nero is not caused by him, but by something in ourselves. And if that is so, then this adventure of ours is quite senseless and hopeless after all."

Varro regarded it as a great triumph that Acte had said: "This enterprise of ours." "Can you remember,

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Acte," he asked, and it was more a prayer than a question, "how much easier our belief in Nero made life for us in the old days? And can you remember the paralysis, the numbness that seized the whole world when Nero died? Didn't you feel as if the world had grown bare and colourless all of a sudden? These people on the Palatine have tried to steal our Nero from us, from you and me. Isn't it splendid to think that we can show them they haven't succeeded? They have smashed his statues into splinters, erased his name from all the inscriptions; they have even replaced his head on that huge statue in Rome with the peasant head of old Vespasian. Isn't it fine to teach them that all that hasn't been of the slightest use? Granted that they have been successful for a few years. For a few years they have actually managed to banish all imagination from the world, all enthusiasm, extravagance, everything that makes life worth living. But now, with our Nero, all these things are back again. Doesn't that thrill you, Acte? The gods have helped us over the first and hardest part of the road. Come in with us, Acte. We'll conquer Antioch, Alexandria, Corinth, the Palatine itself." "You are dreaming," said Acte. But she did not say it in a reproving voice, she herself shared his dream, and her voice was vague and muffled as if by sleep. "It would be lovely," she went on, still in the same dreamy voice, "to live with Nero again on the Palatine. But that will never be. It isn't wise to give way to dreams as you do, my Varro. For if the dream fails——" She fell silent, sunk in thought. "If the dream fails?" said Varro, looking at her; he himself felt the spell of the wise melancholy that went out from her. "If the dream fails——" she repeated, but she still did not finish the sentence. "What then, what then?" Varro demanded impatiently, and he could not tear his eyes from her. "Then all that would remain of me would

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be an old woman," she finished in her clear voice, calmly smiling.

And with the cold logic which was part of her nature she soberly explained to him what she thought of Nero. "You have chosen the right man, no doubt of it," she said. "He can deceive people, he has actually deceived me. You know how deeply Italicus is in love with me. He is a poet and a man, and although he prides himself on his good sense, he doesn't mind making himself ridiculous by the childish way in which he displays his love for me, and I would marry him if I didn't like my present position better. But I frankly admit that the first time I saw your Nero he did more damage to my heart in half a minute than Italicus in years. But, and that is the weak point in your calculations, your Nero can only deceive for a moment, and even then you must be willing to be deceived. He's artificial through and through, the gods have wittily created a wax figure that can talk and move, but he's only the shadow of a man, he has nothing that you could rightly call a human soul. He can't even sleep with a woman, he isn't Nero, he isn't even a man, the necessary apparatus is missing. He's most nearly alive when he's in his labyrinth. He's a ghost; he's what I've always fancied the dead in Hades to be—he's nothing. You've given me a bitter experience, Varro. It's shattering to realise that a man can appear so masculine and royal and great and likable and fantastic and in his heart be nothing at all. I'm scared of myself, of my own movements, my walk, my voice, when I see that shadow Nero."

Varro understood her feelings, and before he brought out his request he knew that she would refuse it. "When I see your face, Acte," he began, "I simply can't believe you're so sober and reasonable as you make yourself out to be now. If I let myself be carried away, why shouldn't you too? Don't be so sensible. Stick to our ship, Acte.

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If we sail it on to a reef, isn't it splendid to have sailed for a while at any rate? And if you stay with us, we won't come to shipwreck."

"I'll admit something to you, Varro," replied Acte. "You know that I love Nero. So violently that his shadow is sufficient to take the colour out of every other man. Your Nero has been the first man to kindle the passion that fell to ashes after Red Beard's death. I can't endure your Nero. I'll go mad if I'm forced to realise over and over again that the spirit leaves that incarnate shadow of a man as soon as you touch him. I can't stand it. I don't like to intoxicate myself; you're quite wrong. And I simply couldn't endure an intoxication that had to be bought by such means. I'm going to leave this place." And when she saw how deeply he was disappointed, she continued, adopting a tone which combined calculation, levity and seriousness all in one: "I won't leave you in the lurch, Varro. I want to help you. You know that I'm a rich woman, I love money, and if I were to do anything for your Nero the sole consequence would be that Titus would confiscate my estates and my brick works in Italy. Nevertheless, if I can do anything for you, if I can do anything for Nero, tell me. I shall do it."

Now Varro could produce at last the question which Nero's supporters wished him to ask; she herself had challenged him. But though he had sent thousands to their death without the slightest scruple, had sacrificed his daughter Marcia, had seen his friend Fronto die with sorrow, but without remorse, had risked his own life over and over again for a trifle, he could not tell Claudia Acte to her face what he wanted of her. Her beauty inflamed him. He could not understand how, when he was young, he could have refrained from making love to her out of mere prudence, and so as not to spoil his relations with the Emperor; how he could have been blind to her beauty,

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her unique beauty. And now that he was growing old he saw that beauty and was filled with remorse. All his life he had said yes to life, he had done nothing which he now wished undone and refrained from doing nothing which he now wished he had done, and yet he was suffering the pangs of remorse now. He repented that he had not staked everything to win this woman, in spite of Nero. He felt a mad temptation to set aside for a time his absurd and sublime adventure, to be nothing but the Varro of former times and take his joy of the marvellous being whom destiny had flung in his path.

So instead of seizing his opportunity and informing her of his request, he said abruptly: "Do you know, my Acte, how we catch the gold fish in the new fish pond in the Golden House?" And he felt as young as he had been in his best days, profound yet frivolous, certain of his powers of attraction, prepared to pay dearly for his pleasures, knowing that one can enjoy life perfectly only after resolving not to count the cost. He felt a deep affinity with Acte such as he had never felt before. It seemed to him that there were three people in the room; the real Nero was there in his prime, but he was no longer a disturbing presence, and between the three of them there was a new community deeper than friendship.

But Acte refused to enter into his mood. Instead she repeated, suddenly interrupting his fantasies in a deliberately matter-of-fact voice: "Tell me, what can I do for your Nero?"

And then Varro pulled himself together and informed her what he and his friends considered the sole effective service that she could render their cause.

It was this. If Nero was really alive, the ashes of someone or other still reposed in the urn in Acte's mausoleum. If Acte was convinced that Nero was alive, then that urn and the mausoleum became ridiculous and

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superfluous. If Acte wished to show the world that she believed in the living Nero, then she must destroy the mausoleum and scatter the ashes of the unknown dead man to the winds.

While Varro brought out all this in a deliberately dry voice, the transparent skin of Acte's face assumed a glittering pallor. But her voice was as clear and calm as ever when she replied in a tone as dry as his: "You ask me to scatter to the winds all that remains of the real Nero so as to prove my belief in the false Nero?"

"Yes," Varro baldly replied, but before that yes had died away he was ashamed of what he had asked of her, and he added more clumsily than was usual with him: "The work of Nero is at stake. That is surely worth a heap of ashes."

Acte gazed for a long time at Nero's friend with her greenish-brown eyes; her shoulders drooped slightly, and her mouth twitched. "What you have just said," she replied with a faint trace of mockery, "is certainly highly sensible. But all the same, it would perhaps have been better if you had not said it." An uncomfortable silence fell; and suddenly all the things that divided them seemed to be in the room.

Acte's whole being revolted against Varro and his demands. In vain she told herself, trying to be sensible: "If he is carrying on Nero's work and has set his heart on governing the world according to Nero's ideas, is it likely that an urn would stop him? For him there's nothing in it but a heap of ashes." But in a deeper part of her she knew that this did not absolve him and that he had done wrong to her and Nero. His opinions might be right for him; they were not right for her. Her reason spoke in a different voice from his. When she risked her life without hesitation to save the dead body of Nero from violation and give it a burial worthy of an emperor,

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it had been the greatest, the most sensible act of her life. What did he mean by acting sensibly? To act sensibly was to act in conformity with one's nature. Piety was an empty word for Varro, but not for her. For her to scatter the ashes of Nero to the winds would be like opening one of her veins. The Greek girl who risked her life to give burial to her brother was not a mere theatrical figure of the poet's imagination. Never, even if she knew it would drive the Flavians from Rome, never would she consent to violate the house of death in her park where her Nero dwelt. It was the most precious possession that remained to her, these relics of her lover and her Emperor; she could not live without them. "I shall not give up his ashes," she said softly and angrily. "I have no intention of doing so."

Varro was silent. He realised that no power on earth could overcome Acte's resistance. He took his leave and went.

Meanwhile Acte prepared in all haste for her departure. If at one time she had burned for Nero-Terence, now she could not endure the air he breathed. Even the memory of his smooth skin filled her with sick loathing.

CHAPTER LV

THE CREATURE RISES AGAINST HIS MAKER

THE news that Claudia Acte proposed to return to Antioch and Rome spread dismay among Nero's friends. Trebonius and Knops insisted that she must disappear before she reached Rome, where she could spread the tale that Nero was a fraud. They did not admit to themselves that they were delighted at having a pretext to get even with the woman for the way in which she had humbled their masculine vanity.

Terence listened complacently to the proposals of his trusted friends. He was vexed that Acte had won the hearts of the people of Mesopotamia merely by appearing in the country; he was jealous of her popularity. He knew that there had been moments in which she had taken him for Nero. Perhaps, he told himself, he might have won her if he had not failed as a lover. He hated her because his power as a man and an actor had proved insufficient, and he could not get over the fact that she had been blind to the aura, the divine majesty, that had gone out from him in the labyrinth. It would be a good thing if this whore were made to disappear, and it was lucky that state policy demanded it. The most natural way would be to murder the woman. But that seemed to him too simple and crude. His revenge on her must be more subtle and refined. He remembered the artificially

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arranged shipwreck by which Nero had got rid of his mother. He dreamt of engineering an accident by which Acte's beauty would be mutilated ; her face, for instance, could be permanently disfigured or the grace of her walk damaged for good. The accident would naturally have to be engineered with such skill that not even she would take it to be anything more than an accident.

Meanwhile Acte had completed the preparations for her departure. But as she was a courteous woman she did not want to leave Edessa without taking leave of the man who after long years had roused passion in her. She went to see Nero.

Nero chanced to be playing with his tame bats in a little grotto that he had built for them. It was an unpleasant surprise to him that Acte had called to say good-bye. It would have suited his plans better if she had tried to steal away secretly. He had made his preparations, and if she had done so she would *not have* escaped alive out of his territory. Now that she appeared before him with such an assured and cheerful air she did not fit into his picture, she confused him, and he hated her still more for not conforming to his arrangements.

He kept her waiting for a while and then received her in the semi-dark grotto. The bats fluttered about spectrally, and clung to the rafters and wall ledges. There were several varieties ; they hung head downwards from their human-like hands ; they had huge ears and faces which resembled the faces of dogs and apes ; they were of every colour. Nero expected Acte to be daunted by the uncanny place. But she was merely repelled. And as his hoped-for effect failed, he did not quite succeed in being Nero during that farewell audience. True, he found many phrases, semi-ironical phrases, to express his regret that she was leaving him so soon, also quotations from the classics which even the real Nero could not have

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improved upon. But everything considered, he decided that his performance was a tame one, and Acte found it still tamer ; indeed she could no longer understand how this man had roused any passion in her.

She was on the point of leaving when Nero at last felt inspiration descending upon him and with it the energy to pull himself together. Yes, the spirit of the real Nero descended upon him. He felt like an Emperor saying good-bye to a woman who had once been near and was still near to him ; and now he, the Emperor, was about to speed the parting guest by dooming her to a death of which she knew nothing. He began to speak darkly and mysteriously of his bats. He spoke of the souls of the suitors slain by Odysseus who followed Hermes like bats to the underworld. He quoted his Homer : "As bats in the nooks of their caves begin noisily to flutter about as soon as but one of the flock leaves its perch, and they crowd thickly together : so the souls fluttered as they followed their leader Hermes down the dark path." Darkly he speculated which of their dead acquaintances was disguised now in the body of this or that grimacing bat. As he spoke he peered spitefully at Acte with his short-sighted eyes, and yet sadly and tenderly too, for this was their farewell. He played Nero taking leave of his mother Agrippina and his wife Octavia as they set out on the journey from which they were never to return. He loved his Agrippina, his Octavia, his Acte, because she was already dead to him, and because he enjoyed the thrill of talking to a dead woman who thought she was still in the land of the living. He could be especially charming to the dead woman because of his omniscient superiority. He was particularly gracious to Acte.

Acte was alarmed. At the start she had thought him merely silly as she watched him playing with his tame

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bats and letting them feed out of his hand. Then he grew uncanny to her. She knew this Nero, knew his strange, abysmal malice. She knew Nero's passion for the sublimely corrupt. Yes, now she could understand how this man had been able to stir her to the depths. She contemplated the faintly contemptuous, gracious, malicious lines round his lips. In Terence playing with his bats she saw Nero playing with the dead whom he had despatched to the underworld. She recognised Nero and realised that he had condemned her to death. The underworld breathed coldly on her and she left hurriedly with fear at her heart.

Neither Terence, nor Trebonius, nor Knops had informed Varro and King Philip of their intentions regarding Acte. Nero felt that these two men would do everything they could to prevent the execution of his plan. Nevertheless they both learned of it much against his will, and Acte had hardly concluded her farewell visit to the Emperor when Varro urgently demanded to speak to him.

"I hear to my regret," said Varro, "that Claudia Acte wishes to leave us." "Yes, my Varro," said Nero blandly, "we haven't been able to keep her, neither you nor I." "As we cannot keep her," said Varro, "we should lighten as much as possible the return journey of such a beautiful and gracious lady." "Yes," replied Nero, "that is so." "I shall put one of my own carriages at her disposal," Varro said casually, "and an escort of a hundred men." "You are too late, unfortunately, my Varro," said the Emperor regretfully, "I myself have provided a carriage and an escort for her." The Senator turned slightly pale. "I would be infinitely obliged to Your Majesty," he said, "if you would grant me the favour of performing this small service for Claudia Acte. I should like to make good to her certain unintentional

slights that happened long ago, and Your Majesty," he added with sly and somewhat sardonic familiarity, "has been seeing our Acte in the greatest intimacy for weeks now." Terence was annoyed at the insinuation, but he did not let it be seen. "No, my Varro," he smiled, clapping the Senator on the shoulder, a thing he had never dared to do before. "There is no use talking. We wish to show our Acte this small final service." His words sounded so menacing that Varro did not dare to withdraw his shoulder from the man's disgusting proximity for fear of provoking him further. "I beg you not to insist," Varro said. "There is a possibility that the journey may miscarry," he added, "unless Acte is conducted to the frontier by my men, who can be absolutely relied upon. In the last few months the road has not been altogether safe." "Do you insinuate that my men are not reliable, Varro?" asked Nero. "I consider my men to be more reliable," retorted Varro. "You are venturesome, my friend," said Nero, and his Imperial face grew dark. "Do you think that such arguments as these are calculated to make me agree to your request?" Varro took himself in hand again. "Consider," he said urgently, "what slanders might rise, what incalculable damage might be done if an accident were to occur to Acte during her return journey. The whole world would say that Acte did not recognise the Emperor in our Nero, but only a potter called Terence. It would be an enormous triumph for Cejonius and the people on the Palatine. No harm must come to Acte," he said almost imploringly. "That is the very reason why I have commanded my men to look after her," Nero explained to him, with a friendly smile.

But now Varro could no longer contain himself. He stepped up close to Terence and said, looking him straight in the face: "It will be a bad business if Acte travels with

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your men, a bad business for you too, and it shall not happen." He spoke in a low voice, but his tone was so resolute, indeed so savage, that Terence started back. Yet he refused to acknowledge that he was only Terence now and no longer Nero, and he retorted: "How will you prevent it?" "Before I would allow," said Varro, "Acte to fall into the hands of your rabble I would simply tell her who you are. Yes, and a woman called Caja will do so too, and I, Varro, will do so." Terence turned pale. But he still remained Nero and stuck to the light tone which the Emperor assumed when he was jesting with his friends. "Varro is very agitated," he smiled, "about the fate of an unimportant woman. I have never seen him so agitated before. Who would have thought that our dear Varro could still fall so deeply in love. I forgive the unseasonable enthusiasm of a lover. But this time I regret I cannot fulfil your request," he concluded half-jeeringly, half-sorrowfully. "You shall not provide the escort for Acte; I will."

Terence had expected Varro to foam with rage. He was prepared for that; this matter must be fought out to the finish. He was afraid of the encounter, but he had also wished it to come. He heartily hated Acte, and he heartily hated Varro, and he felt sure that his hate would give him the strength to beat Varro and prove himself the genuine Nero.

But Varro did not make a scene; Varro did not rage. All trace of anger vanished from his face. He stepped back a little so as to see the other man better, his mouth was twisted into an unutterably haughty and contemptuous smile, and without emphasis, but sure of the effect of his words, he said: "Tush, Terence," and went.

Terence stared after the man, chilled to the very heart, motionless, pale, his face distorted. But after a short pause he resolutely wiped that impossible sentence from

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his mind. It could not be that his ears had heard it. If he had actually heard it, he must revenge himself in the most fearful and unprecedented fashion, he must have Varro, Acte and Caja publicly tortured and executed in some new and terrible manner. He could not do that. Not yet. Therefore he had not heard, the words had not been spoken.

Claudia Acte travelled with the escort that Varro provided for her, and reached Antioch and Rome without mishap.

CHAPTER LVI

THE DIVINE MAJESTY

THE Emperor did not seem to be moved by her departure, he wrapped himself more and more impenetrably in his divine majesty, his belief in his exalted destiny.

He played the Emperor brilliantly, as Nero had done. Money was plentiful. The conquered Syrian towns had been heavily taxed. The property of the communes and the personal property of the supporters of Titus and enemies of Nero was confiscated. Artaban, King Philip, and the other princes, High Priests and chieftains of Mesopotamia and Arabia contributed generously. Nero could indulge his love for colossal buildings. He rebuilt Apamea in great style and named it Neronias. He erected there a stadium, a theatre, and a temple dedicated to his genius ; he also built a new and splendid shrine for the goddess Tarate.

Simultaneously he proceeded to realise his dearest dream. The cliff above Edessa was transformed into an enormous relief where the features of the Emperor should be preserved for all time after the ancient Oriental fashion. The deified kings were always shown riding to heaven on the back of an eagle. But Nero had a more daring thought. He decided to be shown riding on a bat, and the work was to be executed in the most realistic

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manner ; his face must not be idealised and the hideous head and ape-like claws of his steed must be rendered in their complete, naked ugliness ; but at the same time enlarged to superhuman size.

The Emperor's counsellors shook their heads over the overweening presumption which he showed in choosing this symbol. It was true that a great part of the population held the bat to be a lucky emblem, but there were many who associated it with death and the underworld.

Nero laughed at such lugubrious fancies. Death and the underworld ? Nonsensical superstition. Was he not an Emperor from head to foot ? Whatever he thought and felt was Emperor-like, his ideas were divine, and if his daimon told him to choose the symbol of the bat, then all objections became empty air in comparison with such a decree.

He was daring to the point of madness, like Nero in his prime. Encouraged by the example of the Parthian kings, he did a thing which no Roman Emperor had ever dared to do : he had the sacred light, the symbol of divine majesty, borne before him. He also had a gold coin made showing his face in duplicate, thus insolently signifying that he was twice Nero and had died and risen again like the goddess Osiris. With difficulty his ministers succeeded in getting him to postpone the issue of the coin ; they were afraid the twofold Nero might excite the malicious wit of the Syrians. But Nero loved these coins which showed his head twice, and often took them out and looked at them.

As the old Nero had appeared publicly in the theatres of the Greek towns, the new one displayed himself in those of Samosata, Larissa, and Edessa ; and he beamed with pride when the judges gave him the chaplet of victory. The people cheered him, they were flattered to see their Emperor acting on the stage, and he, uplifted by their

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admiration and his sense of his own greatness, rose to still greater heights.

He sought out the company of his most dangerous friend, Varro. The man had not smiled when he confided to him the secret of the labyrinth. The man had been impressed. The man knew that the divine majesty dwelt in him, in him, Nero. So the Emperor began to play with him, and repeatedly insisted on being assured of Varro's belief in him. He did his best to provoke Varro, to goad him past endurance, so as to find out from his words and expression if he were contemplating revolt or nursing dangerous knowledge of the past. But Varro was uniformly humble, he remained the courtier, satisfied if the Emperor let his face shine upon him ; that "Tush, Terence" had never been said. Nero asked him for hints, information how he should comport himself in this situation or that. Varro discreetly gave the required advice. Nero followed it ; but he never did so when Varro was actually present.

Nero's insinuations became more and more overweening. One day the Senator found him absorbed in contemplation of the coin with the double head. "Tell me frankly," Nero challenged him, "don't you find this device presumptuous?" "It is a proud and daring symbol," replied Varro impenetrably, and he took a look at Nero's head and then at the two heads on the coin. But Nero-Terence replied dreamily and complacently : "Yes, my Varro, one must have descended among the bats to have learned so much wise daring."

CHAPTER LVII

THE GOD ON THE BAT

FIRMLY established as Nero's rule seemed to be, the internal obstacles to it were piling up. In the territory he controlled all was not as it should be. Order prevailed, certainly, but it prevailed by virtue of oppression and violence.

In the chief squares of the towns tablets of stone or bronze were now to be seen recording the high-sounding privileges which Nero had granted to the countries and cities in his territory. But for the time being these privileges remained empty words. The presence of the new Emperor imposed burdens on the petty rulers of Mesopotamia far worse than the tribute they had hitherto paid. The princes did their best to push these burdens on to the shoulders of the land owners and business men, and these in turn to hand them on to the peasants and handworkers and last of all the slaves ; so that everybody was made to feel their new burdens.

Trade was not going too well. Rome was closing its usual routes. The caravans which conveyed the silks of China, the spices of Arabia, the pearls of the Red Sea, the fabrics of India to the Roman Empire, taking the products of Rome in exchange, sought out new roads. Mesopotamia's chief sources of income were dwindling away.

The people had imagined that Nero would bring

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them prosperity and abundance, had thought that when they were rid of the necessity to pay tribute to Rome everybody would eat cakes instead of bread and drink wine instead of water. But Nero did not give them cakes ; on the contrary, bread itself became scarce, and one had to dilute one's wine more and more freely. Those who were immediately connected with Nero and his servants certainly gorged to their hearts' content and increased in wealth and public esteem. And there were many who had to do with Nero. There were his state officials, his soldiers and police, there were the people who built villas and houses and streets for him and his advisers, those who turned out uniforms and weapons for his army. These people made up a considerable proportion of the population, about one in ten. But the cakes and fine food they ate were snatched from the mouths of the other nine-tenths.

The outbursts of the discontented refused to be silenced. The dark prophecies of John of Patmos, who still remained inaccessible in the wilderness, disquieted the people more than ever. There were many now who refused to believe that the Christians had flooded the town of Apamea. Also the fact that Claudia Acte, the darling of the people, had gone away roused doubts about Nero. The people who had been robbed of their wealth by Knops and Trebonius, or who had been otherwise impoverished or humiliated, hounded the people on ; and the murdered men had friends who would not forget and would not be quiet.

To make things worse, there were constant squabbles and rivalries between Trebonius's officers and the native politicians and military leaders. From time immemorial the Roman officers had haughtily looked down on their Oriental comrades ; the Eastern soldiers were regarded as mere auxiliary troops, and the native generals were still

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treated with veiled contempt. Philip and Mallukh were enraged by Nero's insane pride and by the brazen insolence of his servants. After all it was they who had put the Emperor on his throne, and they who were maintaining him there. They grimly realised that the swindlers, fools and robbers whom they had called in to preserve the sovereignty of their ancient kingdoms were now threatening to swallow them up. And while they went on supporting them outwardly, in secret they began a slow, subterranean, Oriental war of attrition against Nero. Varro spent himself in trying to reconcile the warring factions; but his success was small, and the enmity between the Western and the Eastern officers and politicians continued to grow.

Nero-Terence refused to notice all these difficulties. He was intoxicated with great words such as Empire, Power, Army, People, the East; but at bottom state policy and economy were of no interest to him, or interested him only in so far as they provided him with material for sounding rhetoric. To be an emperor and a leader meant nothing more to him than demonstrations, great public shows, parades, new buildings, brilliant festivals, power, glamour and, above all, speeches. When confronted with political and economic problems he withdrew with a dignified shake of the head into his divine majesty, convinced that if serious difficulties arose his inner voice would at once show him the right way.

There was only one thing that he took seriously: the maintenance of his divine majesty. He renewed and strengthened the laws against *lèse-majesté* which had been abolished by the Flavian emperors. His Senate must in future proceed as strictly against this crime as in the days of Tiberius and Caligula. Stern ordinances were issued. Nobody except the Emperor might use an emerald to aid his sight. It was forbidden to swear or belch in the

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presence of a statue of the Emperor. The slightest offence, even if unintentional, was harshly punished. Informers flourished.

It was *lèse-majesté* that finally brought about the downfall of the carpet manufacturer Nittai. He had spent much of his money on sport, had laid out the fine playing court at his villa where Varro and Fronto occasionally met, had also encouraged art. But once he chanced to be niggardly in the wrong place: on the day when he made difficulties about the cost of a statue of Mithras which he had ordered from the factory in the Red Street. Now the charge was brought against him that before making water he had refrained from taking from one of his fingers a ring with a stone on which was engraved the head of Nero. The Senate condemned him to exile. The Emperor contented himself with confiscating his property. He and Knops smiled. The carpet manufacturer Nittai wouldn't be able to cheat honest potters again when the order he gave came to a somewhat higher figure than had been estimated.

Nero also decided that the talk about his impotence was blasphemy against his divine majesty. As this talk refused to be silenced by a public edict, he set about stifling it by other means. He summoned women of high and low birth to his bedroom; after a few days these women suddenly vanished, and people wondered and whispered and spread everywhere the news that the gods, envious of Nero's good fortune, grudged him the pleasures of love and condemned to death every woman on whom he laid his hands. When Fate reinstated him on his throne the Emperor had hoped that this curse had been removed from him. But now it appeared that his vital strength was still as fatal as ever. For this reason the Emperor had decided to have nothing to do with women henceforth, and that had been the reason why he had banished

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Claudia Acte from his presence and sent her out of his empire, although she loved him so dearly. There were many people who actually believed this.

Nero felt secure and happy, and his power appeared to be established for all time. When he reviewed his troops the soldiers cheered him wildly. His new city of Neronias was rising on the banks of the Euphrates, and everywhere in his towns fine new buildings were appearing. The nimbus of divine majesty was round him, and a torch was always borne in front of him. There was no one now to doubt that the labyrinth was illumined when he appeared in it. He descended into his artificial grotto and fed his bats, those creatures embodying the souls whom he had sent to the underworld, and there he conversed with them. Satiated with happiness, he contemplated the gold coins showing his head in duplicate. He became more and more lost in the mazes of his divine majesty.

Along the stream Skirtos, above the city of Edessa, his effigy riding on the bat grew clearer day by day as it was hewn out of the rock. Crowds stood round staring at the workmen and the gigantic relief. To Nero it seemed more beautiful than the statue of Mithras. It frightened some people and roused the laughter of others, but Nero could not know that ; for no one dared say what he thought for fear of the spies of Knops and Trebonius.

But the relief grew. Already the day was fixed on which it was to be unveiled and consecrated ; the twenty-first of May.

CHAPTER LVIII

A RADICAL SOLUTION

KNOPS now often visited his father-in-law Gorion, to find out from him what the people thought about Nero. Gorion's increasing familiarity was itself a measure to Knops of the growing discontent of the populace.

No, Knops could not close his eyes to the difficulties that were piling up every day. Wasn't his decision to wait for the fall of Antioch a little foolhardy? Wouldn't it be wiser to desert Nero before that, perhaps straight away?

But there was one thing that kept him from doing this. His girl, his wife, his little impudent Jalta, was expecting a child. The fact that he would have a legitimate, free-born, wealthy son, a sly, sturdy Claudius Knops who would start life with all the chances on his side, filled him with wild joy. He pampered Jalta in his rough way, for she was the mother of the future Claudius Knops; he surrounded her with physicians, nurses and waiting-women, and cursed horribly when she asked for gherkins or other sour things and refused the sweet almond cakes which would benefit her child. No, he couldn't clear out. He had a duty to his little Claudius Knops and he must stick it. He must make one more tremendous effort, and fortify his son against the perils of

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the world by a great wall of gold. He managed to pocket a good deal of the property of the carpet manufacturer, but there were still fatter opportunities left. For instance, there was a certain Hyrkanus, a tax-gatherer, a miser, who had refused to make the expected high contribution to the temple which Nero was erecting to his genius. Didn't that refusal prove that Hyrkanus's money should be in somebody else's pocket? It was his business to transfer it into better hands, the tiny hands of his future son.

No, he could not leave Nero until that was done. But if he stuck to Nero something must be done against the increasingly threatening and rebellious temper of the people; that was his first task. The others were hopeless. They had no imagination. They neither saw the approaching danger, nor could they think of any means for dealing with it. It was up to him, Knops, to find the right means. His head teemed with projects, dozens of them. And finally he found one that covered both his aims: Nero's salvation and a big haul for his little Claudius.

He considered his plan from every side. It was a good plan, daring and radical. Though he certainly became uncomfortable when he thought of Varro and King Philip. They were certain to have thousands of scruples. He was having all manner of trouble with Varro as it was. That, of course, would make Trebonius all the more eager to fall in with his plan. It was a pity, of course, that he had to let Trebonius into the secret and depend on his help. He was jealous of Nero's dependence on the General and of the man's popularity with the crowd; also he writhed under his own servility and envied Trebonius his self-confidence and his capacity to order people about. But he could not be sure whether even Nero would support his plan, and for its execution he required a resolute man who

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could command with authority, maintain discipline and not shrink from shedding blood.

He had no difficulty in winning over Trebonius. The General had for long been yearning for a repetition of the Week of Knives and Daggers. After coming to an agreement the two of them went to Nero.

Knöps began by saying that the people still loved Nero as much as on the day when he had first appeared. The apparent discontents had been brought about by a small clique of envious grumblers. These consisted mainly of people who had been cast into the shade by the rise of Nero, along with others who, after rapturously greeting him at the beginning, had found later that they could not satisfy their measureless greed under his rule. These disturbers of the peace were not many in number, but there were high state officials among them, and they had money and influence. If they could be radically dealt with the air would be cleared. After their experiences during the trials of the Christians, it was advisable to act quickly and cut off these grumblers and grouzers in one appointed night, without going to the trouble of a long and protracted legal process. There could be no doubt of the legal validity of such a summary proceeding. The Emperor was the fount of justice, and that being so he could, once he was convinced of the justice of an accusation, sentence the prisoner and order him to be executed at once. If he cared, he could afterwards lay his reasons for doing so before the Senate. If strong action were taken the discontent of the country would cease overnight, in the literal sense of the phrase. The terrors of such a night would have a wholesome effect on any discontented elements that might still remain, and it would give those who were accustomed to indulge in stupid, lying speeches against the Government something to think about.

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In quick precise sentences Knops developed his plan. Meanwhile he glanced from Nero to Trebonius and back again with his quick brown eyes, sly and friendly. He was obviously amused by his proposal and expected the others to be amused by it too. Just so had he drawn up his plans in the Red Street when he was preparing a surprise for some business rival. These surprises had always come off.

The three men looked at one another, and before Knops had finished they had decided that the scheme was an excellent one, worthy of the originator of the flood of Apamea. They sat quite still, even the noisy Trebonius was quiet, he merely winked across at Knops, but all three were thinking the same thought: "May the whole crowd of them drown in their own blood." And Nero added to himself: "Squash them flat like so many flies."

Aloud he said: "Thank you, my Knops. I shall lay your plan before the gods and wait for my inner voice to counsel me." But the other two knew that that inner voice had already spoken, to the same effect as their own, and each was already busy in his thoughts drawing up a list.

CHAPTER LIX

THREE HANDS

THAT very night the gods spoke to Nero, and next day the three confederates sat down together to consider their plan in detail. Since they had assumed power a considerable number of their enemies had been put to death. But counting their ages together the three men could show one hundred and thirty-four years; they had suffered many wrongs, they had good memories, and in these one hundred and thirty-four years they had collected countless enemies, so that a rich harvest awaited them.

It was true that they could not, or rather dared not, touch the most deeply hated figures of all. For instance, it would have delighted them to shut for good the mouth of John of Patmos, which had spoken so strongly against them. It would have pleased them greatly also to get their fingers round the proud slender neck of Claudia Acte, and it would have been splendid to look on while the aristocratic Varro, who was so polite and gazed at one with such contempt, gasped his last breath. And to knock the dignified Mallukh on the head would certainly have been great fun. And it would have been interesting, to say the least, to find out whether the refined, highly descended Philip would keep his good manners as he was being slowly tortured to death. But the gods were envious and never granted one what one wanted most.

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Still, much was left. They sat round the table, it was a beautifully carved table of fine wood ; and each held a style and a wax writing-tablet—Knops had paper and ink as well. They took notes, scored out, and thought again. Then one would mention a name and the others would smile, for they had set down the same name, and Knops would put down the name on his list, which was the definitive one. Occasionally one of them would raise an objection, whereupon they would leave the name for the time being to decide upon it later ; but such objections were few, and Knops's sheet was presently filled. They took their time, the names came slowly, with pauses between ; and when a name was written down on the final list Nero would accompany the entry with a quotation from a classical author, sometimes from Sophocles, but more often from Euripides.

Their private reasons for giving these names were seldom mentioned ; some political pretext was advanced instead. Trebonius suggested Lucius's name. He disliked that young sprig who had shown such quick decision in the battle of Sura, because of his elegance and his noble name, and because he still mourned for Fronto, and because the women made eyes at him. Oh, if Fronto himself were alive Trebonius would have denounced him with much greater pleasure and nominated him gladly for the list. It was a great pity that that snob Fronto, that boaster, was dead ; he had actually tried to make out he was the man who had won the battle, as he was dying too, but it was Trebonius who had really won it. All that he could bring against Lucius did not amount to much, for he had to conceal the real cause for his dislike of him. Lucius, he said, was spreading scandalous rumours and declaring that Nero, as the friend of the people, hated the aristocrats. Knops could see no sound reason why the brilliant young officer, who was a general favourite, should

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be put away, and so he felt somewhat uncomfortable ; but if he did not grant Trebonius his Lucius, Trebonius might make difficulties about some of his own candidates. So he put down Lucius on the list, and Nero accompanied the entry with a quotation : "Death brings the end of all battles".

Knops for his part had no difficulty in getting his tax-gatherer Hyrkanus on the list. He did not mention, of course, that to his mind Hyrkanus's money would be much better in the hands of his future son than in the chests of its present owner ; he merely referred to the tax-gatherer's refusal to make a contribution towards the temple of the Emperor, and added that Hyrkanus was also sabotaging the financial measures of the Government. But that was quite sufficient. Nero and Trebonius, who were not particularly interested, merely nodded, and Nero quoted from Sophocles : "The gods hate the arrogant man." So there the name Hyrkanus stood in the list in the neat handwriting of Knops, and Knops's heart swelled with elation.

They scribbled on their writing-tablets thoughtfully and tentatively, and when a name was transferred to the final list they economically erased it from the tablets, so as to leave room for new ones. The white, fleshy hand of Nero, perfumed with costly ointments and scents, wrote busily on, and the small bony hand of Knops, and the violent, red, hairy paw of Trebonius kept it company. They wrote down many names, most of them Aramaic, but some of them Roman, Greek, Arabian, Parthian, Hebrew, names of men and women, some very young and some very old. The list already contained three hundred names.

It was a long session, enjoyable but exhausting. They had all to go deep into their memories so that nobody might be forgotten ; for they could settle cheaply

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with their enemies now, and later on that might give them considerable trouble. So they did not complain of their labours, they racked their brains, they sought and sought again, and found. At last the final name was set down. Nero listened to the pen scraping on the paper and said in a dreamy voice : "Not to be born is best." But in his heart he was thinking : "Squash them all flat like so many flies."

"Finished?" asked Knops. "Finished," replied Trebonius and "Finished," Nero said in confirmation ; in all three voices a touch of regret could be heard. Knops counted the names. "Three hundred and seventeen," he announced.

Nero got up ; the session was finished. "Three hundred and seventeen false friends," he said sadly, glancing at the others, and with a sigh he held out his hand for the list.

When Knops and Trebonius were gone he studied the list. It filled four sheets of parchment, not particularly fine parchment, and the names were set down any way, some being squeezed in wherever room could be found for them, at the top, at the bottom, on the margin ; but they were all legible. Nero thought of that terrible night in the temple of Tarate, when he had killed the heavy moments by going over his enemies and deciding to squash them. He tenderly stroked the parchment, gazed at it dreamily, a smile on his full lips. Then, in the writing of Nero, he carefully numbered the sheets, one, two, three, four, and at the top of each wrote : "List of the Proscribed". Then he took up the first sheet, searched until he found a place that was not written on, and then carefully set down the words : "Read, considered, proscribed". But that still did not seem to him quite the perfect formula and on the other sheets he wrote : "Read, considered, condemned". Then he signed each of the

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sheets: "Nero Claudius Caesar Augustus". Thereupon he rolled them up and stuck them in the sleeve of his robe.

That day he dined alone with Varro. After they had eaten Varro spoke of their political and economic difficulties. He had worked out a systematic programme for dealing with these difficulties. As a first step he suggested raising the salaries of the state officials and granting a moratorium to exporters. The Emperor listened more attentively than usual; he seemed to be in one of his good moods. "You are indefatigable, my Varro," he said, "and you are certainly the wisest statesman I have. But in the final resort it isn't reason that decides success in politics but intuition, and the gods give that to none but their chosen, the possessors of the divine majesty." Varro acknowledged this pronouncement with a profound and ceremonious bow. "Nevertheless," he replied drily but politely, "it seems to me advisable to raise the state officials' salaries and grant exporters a moratorium for a start." "Yes, yes," replied Nero in a somewhat bored voice. "No doubt you have thought it all out very nicely, but believe me, my Varro, in the crucial hour only the decisions and deeds of an Emperor are of any use. Even though," he concluded darkly and sententiously, "the ordinary statesman may be horrified by the naked directness of these decisions, their greatness finally convinces the people, they are accepted as the will of the gods, and indeed that is what they are." Varro listened respectfully. "I take it, then," he asked, instead of replying, "that I may present the papers dealing with the moratorium and the increase of salaries for your signature?" Nero pretended not to notice that Varro had ignored his opinions so uncivilly. "You just wait, my lad," he was thinking. "Lots of people will never see your moratorium or your increase of salaries." And he felt with his fingers the precious roll of paper hidden in his sleeve.

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Later he went to the artificial grotto to see his bats. After fastening the torch to a socket in the wall, he sent away his servant and remained behind with his pets. They fluttered about with little twitters and squeaks, thinking he had brought them food. But he merely drew out the roll of papers and read out to the hideous furred creatures: "List of the proscribed, page one," followed by the names. As Knops had set down these names in the order in which they came, the fortuitous proximity of certain of them produced some curious sound effects when declaimed aloud. That greatly pleased Nero. He repeated some of the names, played with them, rolled them out sonorously. Thereupon he recited his favourite verse from Homer: "'As the bats loosen themselves from the rocks and flutter up in a thick swarm, so the souls of the dead fluttered down the path of destruction'." Then he said to his bats: "You'll soon have new companions, my friends." But as he was saying this he was also thinking: "Squash them all flat like so many flies", and the next minute: "The good of the state—wretched and contemptible traitors—the fount of justice." But he was most pleased of all by the last phrase, the fount of justice, and he could already hear himself rolling it out before the Senate in his great speech justifying the necessity of his night of blood.

CHAPTER LX

THE EMPEROR AND HIS FRIEND

KNOPS, too, was always thinking of the list. He pictured the great night to himself, and a slight feeling of discomfort was mingled with his satisfaction : he could not stand the sight of blood. But it amused him greatly to think of the surprised faces of the men on the list when they were rudely jerked out of their sleep.

He could not get away from his list. Even while he was lying beside his wife he kept thinking of it. He felt sure that a few names would occur to him when it was too late to enter them. It was a great pity they couldn't include Varro and Philip.

Next morning he appeared at Nero's palace very early. The Emperor was still in bed, but he admitted him at once. He seemed to be very pleased, and he stretched lazily as Knops entered. "That was a marvellous idea of yours, that list," he said, and he pulled the precious document from under his pillow and straightened it out. "Three hundred and seventeen," he reflected, drawing down his brows over his short-sighted eyes, "a big number and yet not a very big number." He glanced over the list.

And as he lay there reading it suddenly he was no longer Nero. All at once his face assumed a vulgar calculating expression ; it was the same expression with

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which, when he was living in the Red Street, he had scrutinised Knops's account of the credit of some customer. Yes, for the fraction of a second Nero became the suspicious potter Terence again, fearful that his slave might be swindling him.

He felt that his divine majesty had forsaken him, and he was alarmed. He flung Knops a quick side-glance to see whether he had noticed. Knops was standing there as obsequious and devoted and brazen as ever; his face showed not the slightest indication of having seen anything. But Nero wondered what Knops was thinking in his heart. Knops knew a great number of things about him. Too many. It wasn't good for another man to know too much about you. Wasn't it this man Knops who had said that the Roman people would be kept off their work if they ever started to read the Emperor's poems? Only a man who knew too much would dare to make such a joke. Nero's indignation at his divine majesty for deserting him suddenly changed into indignation at the unreliable Knops.

Needless to say, Nero's face showed no sign that he was thinking this. His dignity had long since returned, and his face was as good-humoured and gracious as ever. "Three hundred and seventeen," he repeated in a satisfied voice, gazing fixedly at the list. "It's a good list, but I fancy we have forgotten one or two names. At any rate," he added jestingly, indicating the four well-filled sheets, "we have used up the paper pretty well. There isn't much room left. Let us see. There's hardly a scrap that could hold another name. There's one here, though, and one here. So there's still room for two names. And they must be short ones, otherwise they'll be quite illegible. But then the list will be really full. Let me think for a minute." And he thought intently, biting his lower lip. "I have it," he said cheerfully, "my inner

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voice has whispered them to me, the two short names. It seldom speaks to me when anybody else is present, but it spoke to me just now. You would dearly like to know," he added somewhat maliciously, "what these two names are. But I am not going to tell you, and you would never guess them yourself." The papers lay before him on the bed-clothes; he stretched himself comfortably. Knops felt ill at ease.

"Bring me pen and ink," said the Emperor. Obedient but still ill at ease, Knops brought them. Nero sat up in bed, drew up his knees under the blankets so as to use them as a table, and went on: "Bring me that tablet and hold it so that I can write on it."

And he inserted the two names.

But as he wrote he held the paper so that Knops could not see what he wrote, though he could follow the movements of his fingers. The two names were really very short. As for the first one, all that Knops could see was that the Emperor was writing it in Greek. But the second one, written in Latin, began with a C, he could make that out quite clearly. And before the Emperor had finished it Knops had guessed, indeed was certain, that the second name was Caja.

With a sigh Nero rolled up the sheets again and laid them under his pillow. Then he lay back comfortably and chatted for a while, complaining how many and how heavy were the sacrifices which the divine majesty imposed on those who bore it.

Knops listened reverentially. But as he stood there so humbly attentive, a thousand pictures kept rising and vanishing in his mind with extraordinary speed. "Of course it was Caja," he was thinking. "When he spoke about the sacrifices he has to make he could only have meant Caja. Yes, it's quite certain that Caja was what he wrote. But it's sheer madness for him to have Caja

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killed. As things stand now, Varro can have no thought of using her against him. It's pure insanity to have her done in. It will damage him enormously. And she's the only one who really loves him, apart from me, fool that I am, for I am fond of him too, in spite of everything." This is what he was thinking; but in the midst of these thoughts he was tormented by the question: "What on earth could the other name have been—the first one?"

"The greatest gift," Nero was meanwhile saying, "that the gods can grant a mortal is the divine majesty. But it is also the heaviest burden they can impose. Sacrifice, sacrifice. It demands perpetual sacrifice."

"It's Caja he means, of course," Knops thought. "What nonsense he carries about in his fat head. But who can the other name be, the Greek one? Seeing he has been silly enough to put Caja down on the list, who on earth can the other name be?" And though he already knew in his heart, he tried to reconstruct all the movements of the Emperor's hand as he wrote. And he saw those movements. Saw the hand writing the letter kappa, the vertical stroke and the two oblique ones, saw it forming the simple shape of the nu, the rotund omega, the intricate psi. Curiously enough, he did not feel greatly alarmed while he was realising this. "It simply couldn't have been Knops," he thought. "It's quite incomprehensible that he should put me down on the list, for I have made him what he is, and I'm the only one who can keep him what he is." But at the same time he remembered that unfortunate little jest he had made after the recitation of *Octavia*, to dissolve the stiffness of the company, that stupid joke to the effect that if the Roman people ever began to read the Emperor's epics they would never get any work done; and he remembered that he had felt at the time that he had made a mistake. And all at once he knew quite clearly, and he saw the hand writing

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the three strokes of the kappa, the simple shape of the nu, the rotund omega, the intricate psi. With painful reality the name "Knops" in the handwriting of Nero rose up before him.

Nero, while he was speaking about his sacrifices, had really been thinking of Caja, and that it was a pity she must disappear. "There's no doubt," he thought, "that she loves me. And it isn't her fault really if she's blind and stupid and can't see past her nose. But it isn't mine, either. Perhaps it's unwise of me to despatch her, perhaps I'll regret it some day, but no, it isn't unwise. She simply refuses to recognise that I am Nero. She won't understand. She insults my divine majesty. She can't help it, but I can't help it either if I have to have her removed. There can't be any bond between me and one who insults my divine majesty. A woman who insults my majesty has no right to live. And though that damned woman Acte has escaped me for the time being, Caja at least is left. Squash them all flat like so many flies. Yet I'm really sorry for this little fly, Knops. He's a funny faithful chap. How obsequiously he stands there. Like a faithful dog, and yet sly too. But he made that vile joke and the gods can have no regard for a man who could make such a joke. Besides, he knows more than is good for him. He knows as much about the present Nero as the present Nero knew about the old one. That's too much. But in spite of that I'm sorry for him. I must take a good look at him. Very soon I'll only know him as one of my bats. Squash them all flat like so many flies."

Meanwhile the word "Knops" was dancing before Knops's eyes. "It was Knops, I'm sure of it," he thought. "But why should he put me in the list? It's devilish luck that I should be in the list myself, when I thought of it first. And why? Rubbish. What do his reasons

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matter to me? The only problem now is how I am going to get out of that cursed list again.

"The best plan would be to say nothing and simply clear out as soon as I leave. Walk out through the door and vanish, before he can give Trebonius instructions to arrest me. Once I'm out of Edessa I can send Jalta word to follow me with little Claudius. Should I ask Gorion to come too? No, he would only be a burden. Yet if everything goes wrong it would be a help if little Claudius had Gorion to look after him. Things won't go wrong, of course, but best be on the safe side. But the man flung a beaker of wine in my face. I shan't take Gorion with me, after all.

"Nonsense. It's simply out of the question that he should want to do me in. Nero would never do that to his good old Knops. He's too fond of him. It would be idiotic to give way to panic. And then there's the money. I can't fly and leave little Claudius's money to look after itself. That would be a crime. I mustn't lose my nerve. And who is really the master here? Nero or Knops? It's strange that I always call him Nero even in my thoughts. He's a great man, even if he does like his rough jokes. Yet don't I like them myself? If he wasn't a great man I wouldn't be calling him Nero now. I like him. And seeing I like him, I'll manage to get round him somehow. And I will get round him."

"Oh, have I told you," said the Emperor, with his head lazily resting on the pillow, "that I have decided which night it is to be? The night of the fifteenth of May."

"The night of the fifteenth of May," thought Knops. "That leaves four days still. But I can't wait for four days. I must decide this very minute what I am to do.

"Best to keep to the simple truth. Sometimes the truth is the best card to play. I must show him that

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I'm really fond of him. I must make him see that he has nothing to fear from me if he leaves me alive, but that he has a great deal to fear if he loses me. I'll give him it straight from the shoulder."

He stood looking down at Nero familiarly and obsequiously. On the night of the 15th of May then, he began reflectively, the great purge would take place. It was inevitable that in making such a purge the Emperor must prove the hearts even of those who stood nearest to him, the heart of Trebonius or even of Knops. He, Knops, had searched his conscience to discover if he could find in the most secret nook of it a thought that offended against the reverence he owed to the divine majesty. He had been able to discover no such thought. But he was a common man, his thoughts were imperfect, his knowledge of himself equally imperfect and without the keenness of discrimination which the gods had granted the Emperor. He therefore urgently begged his master to say whether he had discovered anything which made him unworthy to pass the final test.

There was a gentle, malicious smile on Terence's lips. His head lay on the pillow under which reposed the precious list. He stroked the blanket lingeringly with his fingers, and his short-sighted eyes blinked. Then he suddenly opened them quite wide, stared at Knops, and said in a soft dangerous voice: "You know too much, my Knops. Only the Emperor should know so much."

Now all this time Knops had been certain that it was his name that had been set down in the list; but when Nero admitted it without more ado he felt as if he had been knocked on the head. He turned pale, but set himself to consider the matter calmly. The worst was that Nero's reason for removing him could not be affected by his goodwill or by his future good conduct, but was involved with their whole relation to each other, and so was independent

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of him. Yet he found a retort, perhaps the only one that could have weakened Nero in his resolution. "Cannot," he asked humbly, "cannot knowledge be redeemed by love?"

This answer seemed to move the Emperor; his heavy face became thoughtful. "Perhaps that is possible," he said. "But the question remains whether it is worth the Emperor's while to bother about which is greater, the love or the knowledge of a man who knows too much. It would be easier for the Emperor simply to do away with the man who knows too much." It gave him a deep satisfaction to play with this fellow who had joked at his expense. Yet his argument could be used against him, and Knops saw this. "Does the Emperor have no need of friends?" he asked. "Isn't a friend who faithfully served the Emperor in his obscurity of more value to him than any new friend could be?" "You ask too many questions," Nero complacently rebuked him, at the same time savouring the jealous insinuation against Trebonius.

"Listen," he began abruptly, sitting up in bed. "A thought has occurred to me. I shall ask you a question. I allow you three answers. If the third one isn't right, then you haven't passed the test and are worth no more to me than one of my bats." "Ask, my lord and master," said Knops humbly.

Nero lay back again and yawned affectedly. Then he asked: "Who am I?"

Knops considered for a moment. "You are my friend and leader," he replied with conviction. "A bad answer," yawned Nero, "anybody's answer. I want a better one from you." "You are the Emperor Nero Claudius Caesar Augustus," said Knops somewhat uncertainly. "A still worse answer," said Nero contemptuously, "the man in the street's answer. Cheap, cheap.

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Cheap as a copper coin." But in saying this he gave Knops a pointer, perhaps intentionally, for Knops at once thought of the gold coin with Nero's head in duplicate, and without hesitation, his heart beating wildly but his mind quite clear, he gave his third answer: "You are my Emperor Nero Claudius Terence." As he said this he was dismayed at the impudence of his own words. But the face on the pillow smiled and in that smile Knops saw that his answer was the one which Nero-Terence had expected of him.

And so it turned out. Nero remained silent, but his smile grew deeper. "This man Knops knows a great deal," he told himself. "He has grasped the fact that it's one thing to be born Nero, but quite a different thing to have begun as Terence and made oneself into Nero." He stretched again and said: "Come nearer, Knops. Your answer was the right one."

Knops was filled with wild jubilation. This was the hardest test that had ever been asked of him and he had passed it with flying colours. And now he would be able to make that haul he had set his heart on: the money of that greedy old tax-gatherer was already as good as in the hands of his little Claudius.

He stepped nearer to the bed, his heart filled with devotion to his lord and master. "Do you love me more than Trebonius?" he asked pleadingly. "You didn't put him in the list," he said proudly. "He wasn't worth it. Do you love me more than him?"

Instead of answering, Nero merely stroked Knops's hand. Then he shouted: "Go, somebody, and fetch Trebonius." He drew the list from beneath the pillow and scored out Knops's name while Knops looked on. Then, still in Knops's presence, he took his bath and chatted amiably while a slave massaged him. When Trebonius arrived he sent everybody away except Knops. "Here's

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the list, my Trebonius," he said. "There are three hundred and nineteen names, but one is scored out. The scored-out one doesn't count. So there remains three hundred and eighteen. No more must be added and no more scored out. You shall deal with the people on this list as arranged. The night is the night of the fifteenth of May." He yawned and turned away, and the two men withdrew softly so as not to disturb him.

CHAPTER LXI

THE NIGHT OF THE 15TH OF MAY

THE night of the 15th of May was warm, almost sultry, and the Avengers of Nero, who were given the task of dealing with the persons on the list, had a hot time of it. But they did their duty with military thoroughness.

When the men seized her, Caja could not make out what it was all about. She thought the hour she feared had come, that her Terence was discovered and the authorities were hunting for him and his supporters, her among them. She longed despairingly to be beside him in his evil hour. "Don't hurt my Terence, don't hurt my poor stupid Terence," she cried as they cut her down.

For the rest, everything went off as planned. Only fourteen out of the three hundred and eighteen people on the list managed to escape, and there was only one mistake. For the soldiers confused the potter Alkas, a man who had been put on the list because he had once criticised Terence's conduct of the great annual festival of the Potters' Guild, with the musician of the same name. This error was unfortunate for the musician but it was a great relief to the potter. For though the poor musician kept on maintaining he wasn't Alkas the potter, his attackers paid no attention but simply cut him down

as Trebonius commanded. When he was told of this misunderstanding Nero could not help laughing. He remembered the poet Cinna, who had been slain after the murder of Caesar in mistake for Cornelius Cinna. The poet Cinna had become proverbial for his bad luck ; for ten long years he had worked on his little epic *Smyrna* and then, after he had altered it so often that nobody could make head or tail of it, he lost his life through a pure mistake. And thinking of him and smiling at his fate, Nero granted the potter Alkas his life.

When the Avengers of Nero arrived to kill Caja, Varro had tried to prevent them. He had ordered them out of his house, speaking authoritatively, in the tones of a man accustomed to command. But without effect. Their coming had roused him out of his sleep, and flinging on a few clothes he indignantly proceeded to the Emperor's palace. But he was not admitted to Nero. Politely but firmly the chamberlains and officers informed him that the Emperor was composing the speech which he intended to deliver next day to the Senate ; he had given strict injunctions to admit no one. Varro had to depart with what dignity he could summon.

He was angry with himself for not keeping a better eye on his creature and for letting him fall into the clutches of Knops and Trebonius. Then a raging fury against Terence overcame him. He would have liked to get hold of the fellow and strangle him. The position was grotesquely ironical ; all that he possessed was bound up with the fellow, and if he destroyed him he would destroy himself.

He sat alone for several hours brooding over his ill-fortune and his folly. But his anger gradually faded and presently nothing remained but a sense of emptiness and impotence. He took the receipt for the six thousand sesterces out of the casket and stared at the heading on

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the back : "Losses." He had lost much : his dignities, his share in Western civilisation, his friend Fronto and his daughter Marcia, the greater part of his wealth and almost all his illusions. Really the only thing that he had still to lose was himself.

King Mallukh, when he heard of the butchery, got up, put on his clothes and proceeded to the fountain-room. He sat down there with quiet dignity. But in his ears he could hear the shrieks of the slaughtered victims ; the carpets and the plashing of the fountain could not stifle these sounds. Before dawn the High Priest Sharbil came and silently sat down beside him. Towards sunrise Sharbil cautiously observed that a man who used such means as these must have lost his senses. What he meant was that it would be wise to give up this man who seemed bent on destroying himself. Mallukh read that meaning out of his words. But he maintained his serene dignity ; not even in thought was he prepared to consider the High Priest's suggestion. The two men sat together in silence until morning. When Sharbil suddenly left without saying anything further Mallukh became sadder than ever. He had a rich imagination ; the legend he had told to his chance companions in the oases, the legend of a potter who became Emperor, had been filled with fantastic episodes ; but he had never foreseen such a dark and bloody episode as this. For a long time he sat on in despondency. He longed for the desert, but he could not leave his people now. He would have liked simply to ride off, but he was ashamed that morning to look the people of Edessa in the face. With a sigh he at last betook himself to his harem.

When King Philip heard of the slaughter he was so disgusted that he felt sick. He took refuge in his library. There were well-turned verses, noble pronouncements, sonorous phrases in the works of the poets and philosophers

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gathered there : phrases about humanity, wisdom, imagination, freedom. All these things to him were polluted with blood and filth. The proud or consoling words of the poets were only a cloak to hide the blood and filth and misery. And much too obvious a cloak ; a wise man could easily see what was beneath it.

CHAPTER LXII

REFLECTIONS ON VIOLENCE

NERO summoned his Senate, and as in an eloquent speech he justified the necessity of the proscriptions, he felt perhaps a still deeper pleasure than he had felt as he stood on the tower watching the drowning town of Apamea and singing its downfall, or in Rome when he appeared for the first time before the Senate to read the Emperor's message.

He spoke of the heavy responsibilities which the possession of power imposed upon him. "No one will understand," he cried, "what it has cost me to put so many people to death, among them some who were my friends and more than friends. But when I thought of the great Empire of which I am the head, I sacrificed such feelings and sternly resolved that these traitors must be punished as they deserved." He was so intoxicated by his words that he believed what he was saying, believed in the greatness of the sacrifice he had made and the pain it had given him, and he inveighed furiously against the criminals who still supported the usurper Titus and against those robbers, the Christians. He foamed at the mouth and poured out the dregs of his heart to his audience. He thundered, implored, shed tears, beat his breast, and called on the gods to testify to the truth of his words. He ended by saying: "I am

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responsible to no one but the gods and my inner voice. But I have too much reverence for you, city fathers, to wish to evade your judgment. You know what has happened. You have heard why it was done. Now judge me. And if I have done wrong condemn me to death." Naturally they did not condemn him to death; instead they ordained a day of thanksgiving to the gods for having rescued the Emperor and the country from such peril.

That night of blood had the effect upon the Senate and the people which Knops, Nero and Trebonius had anticipated. Nero's action, dreadful and arbitrary as it was, excited respect and admiration as well as disgust. Knops described Nero's action as "a bolt from the blue", and from then on the phrase, "A bolt from the blue" became a part of the vocabulary of the Syrian people.

After their first terrors had subsided the people admired Nero even more than before for his energy and gloomy violence, and they almost forgot their hunger in thinking of the greatness of their Emperor. Now they divined what Nero had meant by the dark symbol of the rider on the bat. The bat, that loathsome incarnation of darkness, was the sole steed on which such a man could ride into the heavens. They felt this and approved of it. And when on the 21st of May, as announced, the relief carved out of the rock above Edessa was consecrated, they greeted with reverential awe the man whose features gigantically stared out at them from the side of the hill.

The murders of the 15th of May roused great indignation all over the world. But the indignation did not last for very long; for when a deed of violence is backed by power people certainly condemn it, but they also quickly forget it.

The Emperor Titus in his palace on the Palatine had no actual condemnation for it. People called him and

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he liked to call himself "The Benefactor of Mankind", but he knew that it was impossible to bring men happiness without using violence. He had taken part in two wars as a general, had been an actor in the *coup d'état* by which his father rose to power, and had seen many men die, and so human life was not very highly valued by him. Nevertheless his mouth twisted with disgust when he studied the list of murdered men. He found the name of Caja there, also the names of many more who had been butchered by Nero out of mere private vanity and revenge. That scoundrel and his accomplices were not actuated by political reasons in the least, but by sheer insane malice. Deeply disgusted, Titus murmured to himself: "How can such a little fish make such a big stink?"

Titus's secretary broadcast this pronouncement. And ever after when a man of no account seized the lead or kicked up a row, people said: "How can such a little fish make such a big stink?"

Book IV

FALL

CHAPTER LXIII

THE SCANDALOUS SONG

YET Nero's contemporaries did not regard that night as the beginning of his fall ; they saw it in a much more trifling affair, an idle song. "The gods," observed a chronicler, "destroyed the man Terentius Maximus, who called himself Nero, with his own weapons. He rose by means of his art, which was that of reciting and singing, and his fall was brought about by a song."

No one knew who wrote the song or who first sang it. It was suddenly there, one of those impudent songs common enough in the East, a melancholy, jeering, Aramaic ditty sung to a monotonous air suggesting the desert, whose monotony made the words sound doubly ironical. This was the song :

A Potter once laid his hand
To a Thing that grew big and grand,
Round went the Thing.

Lady Acte cast an eye upon it,
And then she cried out : fie upon it,
Your Thing isn't the thing.

A Potter belongs to the mass,
Not to the ruling class,
He should stick to his clay and his ass.

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When a Potter forgets his place
Caesar will teach him grace,
Teach him one thing, teach him all,
Till he knows a Big Pot from a small.

So down, Potter, down, don't palter,
Down on your knees, you,
Or Caesar will seize you.

And that means the end of your Thing,
For you'll swing
In a halter.

Accompanied by the cither or the tambourine the song was extremely effective, but even unaccompanied its meaning was sufficiently clear. The air was simple but expressive, a sort of Arabian sing-song with tiny suggestive pauses, and the end, which came very abruptly, suggested in the most unequivocal way that the melancholy puppet it dealt with would receive very short shrift.

Trebonius could forbid anyone to talk about the happenings of the 15th of May, he could punish cruelly subversive speeches against the Emperor, but he could not keep people from introducing a tiny suggestive pause into a song, and he could not keep the melody from spreading over the whole country in less than two weeks. Everybody knew the words of the song, whether he could speak Aramaic or not. You only needed to hum a few bars for everybody to know what was meant, and grin maliciously, thinking their own thoughts.

But the popularity of the song was chiefly due to the fact that in Mesopotamia and the part of Syria ruled by Nero things were going from bad to worse. The events of the night of the 15th of May had strengthened the authority of the Government, it was true ; but that did

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not improve the economic condition of the country. Bread became scarcer, and cakes vanished altogether. On the top of that there was increasing exasperation with the misrule of Nero's servants, the violence of Trebonius and Knops and their subordinates, and the preference shown to a small clique at the common expense. So the potter's song found an echo in the hearts of the whole people. It was sung in the streets of Samosata, Edessa, Palmyra, Apamea, Larissa. The bargemen sang it as they plied up and down the Euphrates and the Tigris, the peasants and slaves sang it as they sowed, ploughed and reaped their fields, the hand-workers and factory workers sang it, the washer-women at the fountain and the children playing in the streets and the Bedouins riding in the desert sang it, the merchants travelling with their caravans through the waste and the robber bands lying in wait for the merchants all sang the potter's song.

It was quite a short song, but it was packed with meaning and it seriously threatened the power of Nero. The people still cheered whenever they saw the Emperor. But anyone who listened attentively could have heard through the shouts of : "Hail, good and great Emperor Nero" the brazen lines of the song :

A Potter belongs to the mass,
Not to the ruling class,
He should stick to his clay and his ass,

down to the ironical end :

In a halter.

CHAPTER LXIV

THE COVERED SHRINE

THE Governor Cejonius was not musical ; yet as he waited for the courier to arrive with despatches from a ship which had just come in from Rome, he hummed the potter's song to himself. He was sitting at his writing-table wearing his heavy robe of office with the purple stripe, and he went on humming the stupid song.

He had changed. The lethargy of the last few months had fallen from him. When the news of the 15th of May arrived he had not asserted himself for a long time. The news filled him with joy. Like the princes of the East, he saw in the night's work an act of despair such as could be committed only by a man who believed his destruction was near.

Since then, however, some time had passed without Nero's affairs showing any sign of collapse. Nero-Terence had actually scored new successes in Syria. All the same—Cejonius felt sure of it—Terence's fall was approaching, and the naïve text of the potter's song was confirmed by confidential reports regarding the internal state of Mesopotamia. The princes and peoples of Mesopotamia were no longer bound to the swindler by love but merely by fear ; they were anxious to get rid of him and would not breathe freely until they had returned to the protection of the true Emperor.

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Cejonius had grown wise, and refrained from falling into over-optimism. He did not consider that Terence's power would fall suddenly and of itself. He knew that Trebonius with his well-armed and disciplined army could still maintain himself in Mesopotamia for a long time. But the whole régime was shaken from within, it was ready to fall, and with the first attack from outside it would fall.

And that attack would come. Cejonius waited with confidence for the despatches from Rome. The time for apathy and inactivity was past. He had furbished up his army, had dismissed everyone who was suspected of sympathising with the false Nero. Six months before his legions had been in a scandalous condition ; but now he knew that none of his officers would listen to the blandishments of Varro or Trebonius.

What could be keeping the courier ? He should have been back long ago. Cejonius picked up some papers and tried to read them, but he could not. If the Ministry of War listened to his arguments, if they consented to recall the fourteenth legion, which had been most infected by the movement in favour of the false Nero, and sent him out the ninth legion instead, then he would have the upper hand at last, then nothing could stop him even if Parthia should declare war.

And that means the end of your Thing,
For you'll swing
In a halter.

Cejonius came to the end of the melody, and he ended on a false note, but that did not interfere with his appreciation.

The courier at last. As he opened the Emperor's letter Cejonius could not keep his hand from trembling.

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He glanced over the long epistle. It was filled with observations on taxes and information about the cult of the god Mithras, but where was the chief point? Ah, here it was: "As regards your suggestion, my Cejonius, that our fourteenth legion should be recalled and the ninth sent out in its place, we have carefully considered the proposition, found it good and given instructions accordingly."

He did not read the letter to the end. The ninth, they were sending him the ninth. That was a terrific justification, a marvellous reward for all his work. He had always been attracted most by the military side of his post. What might he not do now with the ninth legion, that fine body of men? His head was already swarming with a thousand plans. He felt as buoyant as in his first youth. They could go on calling him Jumping Jack in Antioch and in the whole Orient. The name had taken on a different ring these last few months, and now what Varro had ironically prophesied was on the verge of happening: Antioch would no longer utter his nickname jeeringly, but good-naturedly, almost as an endearment.

He must lose no time. The rejoicings could come later. He examined the rest of his mail. There was a letter from his friend Paetus, who informed him from time to time of what was happening in Rome. If his friends in the Ministry of War had taken such a long time to secure the exchange of the ninth for the fourteenth legion, that, Paetus wrote, was due chiefly to the Emperor's increasing incapacity to make a decision. But that obstacle would presently disappear. The Emperor could not survive the present year; he had received this information direct from Valens, the physician.

Cejonius took a deep breath. Yes, that was what his friend said in so many words: "Could not survive the present year", just as if he had written: "Kindest

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regards." And yet it was immense news, a pure gift from the gods. If Titus died, if the young and energetic Domitian ascended the throne in his place, then the potter's song would come true, and he, Cejonius, supported by the Palatine, would cross the Euphrates, smoke these scoundrels out of their holes and hang them on the cross.

Cejonius should at once have sat down at his writing-table again. He liked his work and he always performed it conscientiously, and after the Emperor's letter there was much to do. But he could not work now. He must have movement ; he must come to terms with his happiness. He would go for a ride. He crossed the entrance hall. There stood the veiled shrine with the wax bust of his great-grandfather. No, he need not avoid that bust now. And he actually paused for a moment and threw his shoulders back, and as he passed the bust with head erect he nodded to it and smiled. He would win, he would smash that swindler. And after he had won he would demand his reward, and in the presence of the Emperor and the Senate remove the cloth that covered his ancestor's bust.

CHAPTER LXV

A CONSCIENTIOUS FATHER

As long as the Government of Titus watched Nero's rise without doing anything, doubts regarding his identity were not much heard of. But when the news arrived that the ninth legion had set out for Syria they began to be heard at once. Even people who had hitherto believed in Nero began to doubt their Emperor.

As Nero's Government kept silence about what was happening beyond the frontier and gave out no reliable news, rumours began to spread and as they grew became more and more fantastic. The prophecies of the holy actor, John of Patmos, were strangely mixed up with reports of military preparations in Syria and news of an approaching punitive expedition led by the Governor. John had given the name of the three-headed monster to Terence, Trebonius and Knops, and it was adopted by the people; also it was said that Hercules had risen again to destroy the three-headed monster. Nero's enemies became more active, sneering inscriptions on the walls appeared more frequently, and the potter's song was on everybody's lips.

But Nero had troops in all the towns. They were to be seen everywhere, strong, well-nourished and well-armed; and mere peasants and ordinary citizens, undisciplined and unorganised, could not take up battle with

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these men, greatly as they might outnumber them. So life went on pretty much as before. A stranger visiting Samosata or Edessa would never have thought that the country was in a state of unrest. He would have had the impression that the people were quite satisfied with Nero's rule and quite happy under it.

The native princes and great lords did not tire of expressing in their official announcements their joy at the presence of such an exalted guest. But they slept badly and went about with glum looks. They knew of the growing subterranean discontent among the people and they saw bread, wine and money gradually disappearing. And the tyrannical rule of Terence, Trebonius and Knops was still harder to bear than the oppression of anonymous Rome had been.

Among Nero's counsellors it was Knops who felt most keenly that the cornerstones of the Government were shaking. He could read it in the altered bearing of his nearest friends. His father-in-law Gorion actually went so far now as to roar out the potter's song while Knops was there, although, as the owner of the factory in the Red Street and as Knops's father-in-law, he was really singing it at his own expense.

Knops put up with these insults. He had known that the proscriptions would have only a brief effect, and he had intended to vanish immediately after them; but before that he wanted to put Hyrkanus's money in safety, or rather the money which belonged to his little son. And that money, which to him meant his son's happiness, now held him back. Hyrkanus had been murdered according to programme on the night of the 15th of May, but unfortunately his millions could not be got at as quickly as Knops hoped. They were tied up in countless more or less intricate concerns, and consisted of notes of hand and claims of all sorts, and a part of them

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were foreign investments. Besides, Varro was keeping his eye on Knops, and Varro was a disagreeable enemy to have, for one could not bribe him. So Knops had to adopt a thousand stratagems to convey the money of the deceased Hyrkanus into his own pocket. This still delayed his departure. He felt the increasing danger and longed for safety. He was a brave man. He knew that if he delayed too long he would die a painful and lingering death; and whenever he heard the last words of the potter's song all his nerves jumped. But he was a good and conscientious father and he simply could not leave his son's legacy in danger; so he ground his teeth and stayed on.

CHAPTER LXVI

THE DEAD COMRADE

TREBONIUS strutted about as blatant and good-humoured as ever. With a hundred thousand well-disciplined soldiers, he held he was quite equal to what his foppish colleagues termed the psychological danger, and he made rude jokes at their subtleties. Nor did Cejonius's superiority in numbers alarm him. Though the theoretical knowledge of warfare which the Governor's officers had picked up in their military academies sometimes gave him pause. He felt sorry, on the whole, that Fronto and Lucius were no more, and he spent many an hour wrestling with the *Manual of Military Art*.

Lucius's death itself was also producing uncomfortable reverberations. The murder of the gifted young officer who had done so much to gain the day for Nero deeply displeased the army. The officers and men refused to believe that Lucius could have been guilty of treachery to the Emperor after risking his life in the Emperor's service. Who among them was safe if a man like Lucius could be despatched without trial? The men grumbled and protested and made up their minds not to take the matter lying down.

The army sent a deputation to Trebonius to enquire if he had had knowledge of Lucius's death and consented

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to it, and what had been the young officer's offence and what proof was there of it. They also asked what punishment he intended to visit on the murderer, that is if Lucius was killed without his consent.

For a moment Trebonius wondered whether he should simply court-martial the whole deputation. But he understood his mercenaries and saw at once that it would be wiser not to try to justify the murder. You had to allow the soldier his loves and his hates. Lucius had been popular with the army ; therefore he was innocent and his murder must be a crime. It was a false move to put him on the list, and now Trebonius would have to swallow the disagreeable results of his error. So he pretended to be indignant at the murder of Lucius and promised to give the army satisfaction.

He went to Nero. When he entered Nero was lying on a couch ; he seemed to be in a bad temper. When his counsellors spoke of Cejonius's preparations and the growing discontent in the country, he always listened calmly, indeed seemed hardly to listen at all ; but when he was alone his face grew despondent and his lower lip pouted more than ever.

The potter's song was a great vexation to him. He had been told once that the Jews said their god had implanted an insect in Titus's brain in vengeance for the destruction of the temple ; this insect tormented him without ceasing, and it was this that made him ill. The potter's song went on ringing in Nero's brain like that insect in Titus's ; he could not get rid of it ; it tortured him and nibbled at his divine majesty.

Trebonius's visit was a welcome distraction. "The gods won't speak to me to-day," Nero said, "my inner voice is silent. I really need someone to amuse me on a day like this, someone like that good fellow the potter Terence. Well, you're better than nothing." Trebonius did not

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quite know what to make of this speech, whether he should take it as a good sign or a bad one; and though he was usually sure of himself, he felt slightly uncomfortable. Nero was still for him the Emperor, the god. To ask him what he was about to ask needed some courage.

"My men," he began, "are proceeding more strictly now against that scandalous song. In one week in Samosata alone we have hauled three hundred and twenty-four people before the court for singing it. But they've found a new dodge now. They're singing the song of that silly woman Acte to a new set of words." "What are the words?" asked Nero. "It's a stupid rigmarole," replied Trebonius glumly. "Must I really repeat it?" "Repeat it," Nero said without raising his voice. And Trebonius repeated it. The words were:

You've given your last turn, potter.
Are you glad it's done?
Are you glad it's done?
See how glad I am.

Nero had listened attentively. "That's a really silly song," he agreed. "Shall I prohibit it?" Trebonius asked hastily. "You can't prohibit Acte's song," Nero said drily. "They would only laugh at us in Rome. It was stupid to prohibit the other song. You can't haul a song before the judge." "It's hard," Trebonius agreed dolefully. "They sing the air without the words now. When you arrest them they say it was another song altogether, and you can't prove anything." "It can't be easy," said Nero meditatively, "to root out that song. It's like a thousand other songs and you can never prove that it wasn't some other one." "I won't do anything more about the song then," said Trebonius humbly. "Non-

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sense," replied Nero. "Of course you must go on prohibiting it. You must root it out. But you'll never succeed."

Trebonius silently pocketed the rebuke. "Your Majesty," he began, "Trebonius is your very faithful servant, but he's sometimes clumsy and awkward. It seems now, I regret to say, that I was wrong when I proposed a certain name for a certain list of which you know." Nero knitted his brows. "Wrong?" he replied. "I approved the list; therefore it must have been right."

Trebonius stopped in dismay. But he had promised his soldiers to give them satisfaction, and he was obstinate. After a while he began again. "The army loved Lucius," he said, "and they love him still." "Lucius?" said Nero in bewilderment. "Who is Lucius?" "He's the man I mentioned a minute ago," replied Trebonius, and when the Emperor showed no sign of displeasure he took heart and went on hastily: "The army is the Emperor's hand. If the Emperor's hand receives a trifling wound, a scratch, let us say, shouldn't the Emperor apply a salve to it?" "If Nero becomes impatient now," he thought, "or angry, then I'll give up the whole business. I'm sorry about my men, but I'll simply have to court-martial them after all."

But Nero still showed no sign of displeasure, he merely smiled, so Trebonius went on: "The Emperor has not honoured his soldiers with an address for a long time. The army is thirsting for a word from the Emperor. An encouraging word from the Emperor will make the army twice as strong as it was before." "Well, what's all this about your Lucius?" asked Nero graciously. Trebonius had still the most difficult part of his task before him. "It might be well," he said cautiously, "if the Emperor were to explain the death of Lucius to his soldiers, if he

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made it clear that he too considered Lucius a good officer and is sorry that he had to die."

Nero looked Trebonius up and down through his emerald. "So," he said, "I am to bury your dead for you. Do you know that you're very impertinent, Trebonius?" But the words did not have a very ungracious ring. Nero thought for a little, and while he thought Trebonius was painfully aware that his master's decision might considerably impair his own popularity with the army. He gazed intently into the Emperor's face, wondering what he would say. Presently the Emperor opened his mouth; now he was about to answer. Trebonius listened eagerly. But what came from the Emperor's lips was not an answer but that little scandalous song. Trebonius wasn't musical and he easily mistook one note for another. But this time he could not be mistaken, it was the song, and Trebonius was appalled.

Then the Emperor suddenly ceased humming the song, smiled and said: "To be frank, the idea of celebrating the death of a gallant soldier is not without its charm, and I fancy a funeral oration might make a good show among my other writings." And while he sank into thought again, his mind obviously occupied with his speech, he mechanically hummed the song. Trebonius took his leave, more alarmed than elated.

So Nero invited his chief officers to a gathering in his little private theatre. First of all he put on a heroic opera whose subject was the death of Clites, the man who had saved Alexander the Great's life and was later murdered by him in a drunken orgy. After this symbolical performance, Nero made his apologia for the murder of Lucius in a great speech which combined the heroic with the pathetic. In manly words he lauded the gallantry and the military genius of Lucius. That done, he began to praise discipline, and explained that they were at war,

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fighting for their lives against the usurper Titus, and in war discipline was of the first importance. More than once, in the presence of reliable witnesses, both Roman and Oriental, Lucius had made subversive speeches and spread stupid lies about the Emperor's low birth and the favour which he showed to men of low birth. There was sworn evidence to prove this. These documents could be seen at any time by Trebonius and the other officers. It was possible that these foolish speeches of Lucius were due to mere youthful folly, and in time of peace they could have been pardoned. Not so in time of war. He had examined the whole matter, carefully weighed it, and come to his decision. It had not been easy for him to decide as he did, for he had loved the young officer as a son. But just as Brutus had condemned his sons to death, so he had been forced to condemn Lucius, after listening to the voice of the gods. It had been a great sacrifice, one of the greatest among the many which he had made for the good of the state and the army. But he hoped the army would show by their deeds that the blood of Lucius had not been shed in vain, and that from his blood a new discipline would blossom.

He was in good form ; he shed tears at the right time and thundered at the right time, and took fire at his own words. Yes, strangely enough, while he spoke he was honestly grieved at the death of his gallant young soldier. But the officers sitting in the theatre were more embarrassed than moved by his words ; many of them wondered whether it would not be both wiser and more honourable to join their comrades on the other bank of the Euphrates, instead of serving under the colours of this play-actor. And one of them on leaving the palace voiced the general opinion when he said : "An opera within an opera is a bit too much."

Trebonius, who listened to the speech from the

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Imperial box, had every reason to congratulate himself ; he had carried through his difficult task and induced Nero to apologise to the army. But even he felt more embarrassment than satisfaction. As he listened to the Emperor's grandiloquent phrases he could hear the potter's song behind them, and the song drowned the fine phrases, and Nero was no longer Nero but only the potter Terence.

CHAPTER LXVII

WORK AND NEVER DESPAIR

VARRO had remained away from the gathering. That was a superfluous affront and therefore unwise ; but he could not overcome his repulsion to Knops and Trebonius. Formerly he had despised them too much to hate them. Now that he felt his helplessness more and more clearly his hostility to them grew.

Not that the idea of the proscriptions had actually shocked him : what he could not get over was the stupid vulgar way in which it had been carried out. He was not sentimental, but he kept his private feelings and his political feelings in different compartments. To bring acts of personal revenge into politics seemed to him both amateurish and tasteless. To kill off people like Caja and Lucius under such a pretext was not so much a crime as a piece of fatuous stupidity.

He mustn't let these creatures of his get too powerful ; he must draw their teeth for them. . And that wasn't so easy. Trebonius was violent and popular, Knops unscrupulous and sly. Varro hired agents to collect information about them. He had written proofs that the two men had used their posts to revenge themselves on their private enemies and dishonestly enrich themselves. Varro himself had the healthy insensitive greed of a Roman and felt no pity for the oppressed and down-

trodden ; indeed in his time he had exploited whole provinces without the slightest scruple. But he had done it skilfully and cleanly, and these two were doing it clumsily and dirtily, and he was quite honest in his disapproval of their methods.

He had not much time to plot the downfall of Knops and Trebonius. The difficult and intricate business of administration needed all his attention. He had continually to devise new means for dealing with the growing discontent of the population and for securing the money needed to strengthen the army. So he worked hard. By an almost furious activity he tried to drive away the feeling of hopelessness which now so often overcame him.

When work was of no use he had a last refuge. Since Claudia Acte's arrival in Edessa Marcia had not avoided him so much as before, and after Acte's departure their new familiarity lasted. Marcia did not refuse to see him when he called on her ; indeed, she sometimes visited him of her own accord. He would sit for hours with her, or walk up and down and pour out his cares to her. He would inform her that it was foolish presumption for any single man to imagine that he could change the history of the world. Even the greatest men were forced to do nine-tenths of the things they did by circumstance. He, Varro, was just as much a puppet as Nero. It was not his statesmanship that had made his plans successful, but a conjunction of influences, a simultaneous working of fortunate circumstances which were quite independent of him. But in that case, what was the final cause of political success ? In most cases it was quite remote from the actor and belonged to a region unknown to him, involved as he was in political intrigues. So how could great political changes be really effected ? On what did the future of his project depend, of Nero's project ? Certainly not on the moods of the people of Mesopotamia,

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nor on the military preparations of Cejonius. Short-sighted fools, people who could not see past their noses, might believe that his own fate and Nero's fate depended on whether Titus died now or next year, whether Artaban won in the hard fight he was presently waging in the far East, and suchlike things; yet these were things whose course one could not assist or retard, things which nobody could safely take into account. He, Varro, had done what he could to bend events to his own interests, and he would continue to do so. But it was very little that he could fling into the scale, and he would be a fool to believe it counted for much.

This was the sort of thing which he said to the silent Marcia. Her eyes followed him as he walked up and down, but he did not know if she was listening or if she understood. Once, when he had put his thoughts before her, she replied: "You should speak to Fronto some time about it. He's a very clever man and knows a lot about these things." "To Fronto?" asked Varro in embarrassment. "Yes, Fronto," Marcia replied in a matter-of-fact voice. "Where can I find him?" Varro asked cautiously. "You must look in the right way," she replied thoughtfully, "if you want to see him. Many people mistake him for Nero. If you had let me be a vestal, Father, as I wanted, then I believe I could always see him." She said this smilingly and quite without bitterness. Varro did not know what to reply and hastily left.

For some time he avoided her. But he could not live without these conversations, one-sided though they were, and began to call on her again. He tried to talk himself into a state of confidence. "It's really astonishing," he said, "what we've achieved here in such a short time. We've created a strong and efficient army, we've got the native troops to a passable pitch of efficiency by a course of Roman drill, and have an understanding with

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Artaban to secure us against attack. All over Mesopotamia the towns have quite a different look already ; the administration has improved, it's thoroughly organised now. We've got the Romans and Greeks here to look on the Orientals with different eyes and treat them better. The relations between East and West have never been so friendly as they are now. It would be a calamity if all that came to grief, and it won't come to grief. The discontent of the people will pass. Wait till I get rid of these two rascals Knops and Trebonius, or whatever they call themselves. We're doing good and sensible work here, and it's bound to turn out well in the end."

This time Marcia seemed to be listening to him ; there was a smile on her pale face, a smile of comprehension, it seemed to him. But when he finished she made no reply. She merely hummed softly to herself. The potter's song, if he was not mistaken.

CHAPTER LXVIII

A FATEFUL BATH

ON the 4th of September the Emperor Titus went to his country estate near Cosa, as he always did at that time of the year. During the short journey he complained of feeling sick, and as soon as he arrived he lay down and never got up again. On the 13th of September his fever mounted dangerously high, and the physician Valens prescribed a snow bath. While taking this bath in the presence of the physician Valens and the Jew Flavius Josephus, the Emperor Titus expired.

Many people declared that Valens prescribed that fateful snow bath against his better judgment, instigated by a certain personage who was interested in the Emperor's succession. How much truth there was in this rumour it was hard to say. Valens was considered the most brilliant doctor in the Empire, yet it was difficult to decide how long a patient should stay in a snow bath, even the best physicians might easily make an error in such a matter. However that may be, Titus died in his snow bath, and since the 14th of September he had been a god and his brother Domitian was now Emperor.

The news flew over the whole world. With incomprehensible speed it crossed the sea to Syria and Antioch.

When the courier arrived, the ominous feather fastened to his staff, Cejonius guessed the news before

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the man opened his mouth. He involuntarily flung back his shoulders and drew himself erect and became Jumping Jack from head to foot. He imperiously told the man to leave him. Then, alone with himself, he gave himself up to his joy.

As the loyal state servant Lucius Cejonius who had sworn fidelity to Titus, he felt slightly ashamed at not experiencing the slightest grief now that his lord and master was dead. But he could not help it ; he was filled with jubilation. Titus had called himself the peaceful Emperor. Peace was an admirable thing ; but when peace had to be paid for—now that the Emperor was dead Cejonius could afford the thought—with such cowardice, such cringing and ignominy, it grew rotten and infected the whole world with disease. Now that madness was over. Minerva, the goddess of Wisdom, would take the world again into her firm cool hands ; he, Cejonius, was the Viceroy of this part of the world and he had done his work well. His army was ready for any emergency, and with the help of that army he would impose peace within his boundaries.

He smiled. He thought of Varro's ironical smooth face. Yes, he had the laugh now, not Varro. For long months it had looked as if that man were going to be right ; but Cejonius had won in the end after all, and his victory had been a victory for duty, discipline, Rome, reason.

In Mesopotamia the news of Domitian's succession had given rise to wild rumours. It was said that Cejonius purposed crossing the Euphrates with two hundred thousand well-drilled troops to take a terrible revenge on the towns of Mesopotamia ; the actual date was known, and everybody talked of an ultimatum which was due to expire on the 10th of October.

Nero was famous for producing "bolts from the blue" ;

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he had done so in the matter of the inundation of Apamea, the massacre of the Christians, and the proscriptions. With equal suddenness his people turned against him now that his power seemed to be tottering, and covered him with hatred and contempt. Nero was Nero as long as the people believed in him. The moment they began to doubt him he became Terence. Actions which had seemed noble when done by Nero became common and disgusting when committed by Terence. More. His deeds hitherto had proved that he was Nero, for only an Emperor could be so sublimely pitiless. But now the very same deeds showed that he must be Terence: for only a base slave could be capable of such gruesome crimes.

Processions marched through the streets of Samosata and Edessa singing in chorus the potter's song. Riots broke out. Trebonius at once proclaimed martial law, and at a ruthless expense of blood reinstated authority again. But he could not prevent several garrisons in Nero's territory from going over to Domitian. The men overpowered their officers, tore Nero's effigy from the colours, and sent deputations to Cejonius informing him of their repentance and their unquestioning obedience henceforth.

CHAPTER LXIX

THE CREATURE SETS HIMSELF FREE

NERO was sitting at dinner when the report of Titus's death arrived. Although many guests were present, he did not manage this time to keep up his pretence of indifference. He tore the report to tatters, overturned the table, smashed the glasses, and savagely ordered his guests to leave.

But by next morning he had recovered his composure again, and when his counsellors referred to the political situation he seemed as blasé and bored as ever. One day when Trebonius informed him that he had executed one man in ten belonging to a division that could not be trusted, he nodded his head and said softly: "Well done, my Trebonius. Just carry on. Squash them flat. Squash them all flat like so many flies."

Then the news arrived that Sura itself had gone over to Domitian. Nero received the tidings with composure. But later in the day he summoned a woman called Lyde, who was known as the most skilful poisoner in Syria, and asked her to prepare a speedy and painless poison. She brought him the powder in a golden capsule; it was not large enough for him, and she had to work for a long time before she had a dose that would content him.

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When he was alone he was tormented by thoughts of disaster. He would repeat to himself the lines in which Achilles bewailed in Hades the lot of the dead: "Rather would I serve as a slave in the land of the living than reign down here as a king among the shades." He sank into melancholy. When had his bad luck begun? He did not need to think long to discover that. It was he who had brought misfortune upon himself, and he knew the very moment when he had done so. It was when he took up his pen to write the name of Caja in the list. It was a good list. But he had spoiled it by that terrible error; he had provoked the gods and brought disaster upon himself. He could remember that moment with absolute clearness: how he had drawn up his knees, how Knops had fetched the writing-tablet as a support, how he had taken up the pen. The gods had not guided his hand then. His divine majesty had not set down that name, but the foolish clumsy hand of Terence.

Now that disaster was gathering round him he felt how lonely he had been since Caja's death. As long as she was there he knew he had one refuge to which he could fly when everything collapsed, and it was his consciousness of this that had given him his sublime assurance. But now that Caja had gone to the underworld he was suddenly transformed back into Terence, and into a Terence without Caja, a poor defenceless slave who had been too presumptuous.

When a potter forgets his place,
Caesar will teach him grace.

Caja had been like a good woollen shirt in winter: she continually chafed him but she gave him a warm feeling. Ridiculous as it might seem, the magical assurance which had enabled him to act the Emperor so calmly came from

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poor vulgar Caja. And he, fool that he was, had sent Caja to the underworld and broken the charm.

He visited his bats. He studied their hideous faces almost in apprehension. Which of them was Caja? He tried to stroke one of them, but it flew away with discordant shrieks. They hated him. Caja must have told them what he had done, and now they hated him. Caja would never rest until she had forced him to join her down there, for she was bound for ever to him. The squeaks of the bats sounded like the shrill cries of the furies hounding Orestes in the play of Aeschylus: "Seize, seize, seize, clutch him!" and the little shrill cries stabbed his nerves.

He felt a deep pity for himself. Caja was to blame for everything. For she had refused to believe in him. If she had believed in him he would never have been so mad as to murder her. Why had she not believed in him? Probably because he had failed her as a husband. And he had failed her because he needed all his strength for his art and his people. He was a victim of his art and his love for humanity.

A victim, yes, he was a victim, however you looked at it. It was not he who had failed, but the others. The gods had fashioned him to shine, to make great speeches, to manifest the divine majesty. It was not his business to give the people bread, wine and money; that was the business of his counsellors and they had failed him; he had done all that his office required of him.

He had made only one mistake, and he was now suffering for it: he should not have put Caja's name on the list.

Sometimes during the night, while he was dozing in his bed, he was tormented by the most unkinglike thoughts and memories. His father, a good-natured man, had tended to spoil him as a child. But there was one

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thing that he insisted Terence must not do. In the sale-room where the statues stood, little Terence was never allowed except in the care of grown-ups. His father was afraid that he might damage the statues. So, indulgent as his father was towards him, he gave him a good beating whenever he found him alone in that room. But little Terence could not resist the attraction of the forbidden room ; the clay images drew him so strongly that he simply had to examine them with no one there. He fingered them, tapped them with his fingers to hear the pleasant hollow sound they gave out, to hear their voices. He made up many a story about these voices. Each statue had a particular voice of its own, and the male statues had different voices from the female ones. Unfortunately the statues were arranged in rows, all the Mithras's here and all the Tarates there, so that he could never compare the sounds they gave out without a long pause between. Now one day when little Terence had stolen unobserved to the sale-room, he took heart, seized one of the statues of Tarate and tried to carry it over to the nearest Mithras. The statue was fairly heavy and it was hard work. He was almost there when, at the very last moment, his Tarate slipped from his arms and fell, breaking off the hand holding the tambour. Little Terence shook with fear. His father might come any minute and beat him, half-kill him, because he had broken the statue. Blind terror rose within him, his knees trembled, he could feel the blows he would soon receive, and they were much worse than any real punishment could have been. And so now, lying between asleep and awake, Nero-Terence could feel the disaster that was impending, could see the mob flinging themselves upon him, beating him, trampling him to death ; and he dreaded the night, dreaded above all that evil quarter of an hour of uneasy semi-slumber that preceded his sleep.

CREATURE SETS HIMSELF FREE

Sometimes now he could no longer make out who he was : Terence waiting to assume his true guise, the guise of Nero, or Nero waiting to be changed back into his real shape, that of Terence, the cherished husband of Caja. He had two faces : which was the real one ?

A trifling incident showed him clearly which was the real one ; for it forced him to act in his own person, and made him speak with his true voice ; and the voice that spoke was Terence's, and the will that acted was not Nero's.

This is what happened. Chance passers-by still continued to gaze up with respect and a faint uneasiness at the gigantic relief showing the Emperor riding on the bat. Then one day a crowd of young men began loudly to jeer at it. The onlookers smiled, and seeing this the young men felt encouraged to go on, and one of them flung a stone at the effigy of the Emperor. Another followed his example and presently a perfect hail of stones was flying. But they did not do much harm to the huge relief. Then a man climbed up to it with an iron bar in his hand. He let fly at the Emperor's nose and broke a piece off. Thereupon the others climbed up after him, and set about destroying the relief with stones and bars. They did not do very much damage. The rock was hard, and presently Trebonius's soldiers arrived and put an end to the unseemly proceedings.

Much more serious demonstrations had happened in several towns, and the Emperor had remained quite calm. But at this puerile violation of his statue he completely lost his composure. He collapsed into a chair and sobbed and cried without restraint before his embarrassed clerks and lackeys.

At last, still sobbing, he ordered them all to leave him, lay down on the couch and waited for his inner voice. It spoke. "Up you get," it said. "Out of this. Leave

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Edessa at once. Better look slippy too. This is your last warning. Clear out." The voice was very like Caja's and it used her vocabulary. He lay rigid and listened while it rudely exhorted him: "Go while you can. Clear out. And be slippy about it." For a long time he lay in deep fear. At last he got up with a great effort. He sat and thought for some time. Then he clapped his hands and ordered his servant to bring Knops.

While he was waiting for Knops he walked up and down the room with heavy steps, muttering to himself, his mind in confusion; now and then he would listen and look round him as if his enemies had already come to seize him. At last Knops appeared, and without preface, without advancing any reason, Nero begged him to fly that very night in disguise. They would make for Ktesiphon, the capital of King Artaban.

While Nero was pouring out this stream of words, Knops stared at him with quiet intentness; but the room seemed to whirl round him. In his heart he knew that his love for his little son had made him miss the right moment; now that Domitian had ascended the throne his chance to jump off Nero's chariot before it plunged to destruction was gone. And at the realisation that Nero, no longer lulled in blissful assurance by his infatuation, himself recognised that all was lost, Knops felt as if he had received a stunning blow.

Meanwhile Nero went on imploring him to fly. "We must get away," he said. "We must leave this place. We must clear out at once." Knops listened with only half his mind; he was filled with contempt for the fool. Fly. What madness. The road to Artaban was long, and as soon as Nero left Edessa rebellion would break out everywhere; he would never reach the south-eastern frontier with a whole skin. In Edessa he had at least a strong and reliable bodyguard.

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While Nero talked Knops's brain was working automatically and precisely. One of the axioms which had brought him success was always to exploit his master's stupidity. What advantage could he snatch out of this last folly of Terence? He considered the matter coldly and clearly. And a plan rose in his mind; he saw his way out.

Yes, he would accept Terence's suggestion and fly with him. But not to Artaban. The long journey to Parthia through a Mesopotamia in revolt would be full of danger; and even if they did succeed in reaching Ktesiphon, what could they expect there? For himself the wretched life of a pauper; for he would have to leave the greater part of his wealth behind him on Roman and Mesopotamian territory, where he could not touch it. No, he would rather take a more daring risk. He would not conduct Nero across the Tigris to Artaban; he would take the much shorter road across the Euphrates, and deliver him up to the Roman authorities. In that case he could reckon with some assurance on being pardoned for his offences.

He considered all this in furious haste, while Nero was still talking. When the Emperor finished he fixed his eyes apprehensively on Knops, and he was visibly relieved when Knops said yes, after only a slight hesitation. But Knops not only said yes; with the speed and decision of an experienced man of action he made arrangements for their flight. He informed Nero that he would get an ample cloak and hood which would effectually disguise the Emperor, would call for him at a quarter before midnight, and would see to it that a few dependable soldiers would be waiting for them at the south-eastern gate.

Perhaps Nero might have noticed at some other time, for he was sensitive to the behaviour of people, that Knops's words were somewhat forced and awkward. But

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he was shaken with panic, and Knops's inner agitation quite escaped him. But it may be that he did not want to notice it ; for he was blindly resolved, now that Caja was dead, not to lose his other old friend. He embraced Knops and fervently thanked him.

CHAPTER LXX

TERENCE SHOWS HIS SOUL

SHORTLY before midnight then, as arranged, Knops called for Terence, and enveloped in their cloaks they set out for the south-eastern gate, which lay at some considerable distance. The streets were almost empty, but now and then patrols went past, and Nero took care to avoid them.

There was a half-moon in the sky ; the houses lay drenched in its white light. Dogs were lying asleep in the deserted square ; when the two men approached they wakened up and growled. Nero felt apprehensive ; his star was the sun, not the moon.

Ringings footsteps approached ; who were these men at the other end of the street ? Could there be still more soldiers in the town ? Knops tried to persuade him that he could rely upon the soldiers. But in his panic Nero refused to listen. The same fear seized him that he had felt during his flight from the Palatine. If the soldiers saw him he was lost.

The street they were in was a poor street in the Christian quarter, and they had stopped before a small, dilapidated and apparently empty house. Nero pushed against the door ; it gave. Knops tried to stop him. But Nero tore himself free, leaving his cloak in Knops's hands,

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slipped into the house, slammed the door, and pushed against it with all his strength ; then he found a huge wooden bar and drove it home.

Standing in the darkness he felt he was safe from the soldiers, at least for a few minutes. He was glad to be out of that accursed moonlight. He was glad to be rid of Knops too. He crouched into the darkest corner, glad of the welcome darkness. He stayed there with a loudly beating heart.

The clatter of arms came from outside. Probably they were questioning Knops. They stayed there for a long time, for an eternity. At last the steps receded and died away.

Good. Now he could breathe freely again. Everything was silent. But no. Someone was trying the door. The house was neglected ; the wooden bar might not hold. For a little Nero stood where he was, while the man outside went on vainly trying the door. Knops, probably. Now he was calling to him in a low voice. Yes, that was Knops's voice. Should he let him in ? No. Knops was too foolhardy. He had almost led him bang into these soldiers, and then he would have been lost. He made up his mind to wait for a sign. If Knops managed to open the door, he would go on trusting him ; if he didn't, he would set out alone for Parthia. The soft urgent cries still came from outside. They went on for a long time. At last they died away. It was decided. Nero would remain alone.

He crouched in his corner, pleased with this issue of events. But presently he began to shiver ; it was one of the first nights of autumn and the air was chilly. He got up and slapped his arms, but the floor creaked and that frightened him. There was a rustling somewhere ; it might be a rat. He crouched down again in his corner, shivering his cold limbs, and cursed Knops for taking away

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his cloak. Caja would never have taken his cloak from him. If he only had Caja now.

Yet why should he want Caja? Did he need Caja? He was Nero. Or wasn't he Nero? Yet he had read the message out to the Senate, he had sung on the tower of Apamea with the flood beneath him, had justified the proscriptions in a wonderful speech. Could he have dreamt all that?

It was certain that he had once been Nero and that he had once been Terence. He saw himself quite clearly addressing the Senate, reviewing his troops, supervising the procession of the Potters' Guild, saw himself strutting in pride before the people, signing edicts and haggling over statues. All that had been once. But it had passed. It no longer existed. What was he now? Neither Terence nor Nero.

He stretched himself out on the floor, humped his shoulders and drew up his legs. He would sleep for a little. He counted a hundred, then five hundred. He mechanically repeated to himself some of the verses he knew. And suddenly he was once more the boy who had slipped into the sale-room and broken the statue of Tarate, and now his father was coming out of the night to beat him, and where statues were concerned his father knew no mercy and would half kill him.

No, he could not sleep on this hard floor. His limbs were stiff with cold. It would give him rheumatism or pneumonia, and he would die a miserable death.

He rubbed his limbs again to warm them. Then he felt something hard and angular under his fingers: it was the capsule with the poison. Should he swallow it? He simply must swallow it. But how could he be sure that his death would be a dignified one? He sniffed the powder, but it had no smell. He had heard of people who vomited after taking poison and died in the most dis-

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gusting way, writhing in convulsions amid their vomit, blue in the face. So he did not swallow the poison but crouched down in his corner again and waited for his fate.

His fate arrived. Someone was trying the door again, someone with a more expert hand. It managed to do at once what Knops had failed to do. It opened the door. There was a sound of footsteps in the house.

The man who entered obviously knew his way about. He stepped out confidently and proceeded to kindle a fire on the hearth. Terence shrank into the farthest corner and held his breath so as not to betray his presence. Sparks flew ; the wood took fire and blazed up. Terence watched, half-dead with terror. Now he could see a man in an ample, yellowish fur cloak such as the Bedouins wore. Then he caught a momentary glance of a face, a worn and furrowed face. His heart almost stopped. He recognised the face from that one glance. It was the very face that he wished least to see just now, the face of John of Patmos.

For John had returned. For a long time he had been content to inveigh against his enemy from the wilderness, but now his time had come. The Anti-Christ was falling and he, John, had come to give him the death blow.

From his corner Terence stared at John's gloomy face. The man's beard was still more neglected, his eyes under the busy brows still more menacing. Terence felt a nameless fear, a supernatural dread ; from head to foot he was filled with fear.

And then John saw him. For a fraction of a second he remained rigid, recovering from his astonishment. Then he stared at the man Terence, the man Nero, the tin-pot Anti-Christ, that walking fraud, that incarnate evil. He drew himself erect. The furrowed face seemed to Terence enormous, gigantic. But he could not turn away his eyes,

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he had to gaze into the burning eyes of the other man, though it was like dying a hundred deaths.

John got up. He was tall, but not extraordinarily tall ; yet to Terence he seemed a giant. And he moved one foot and then the other foot and began to walk towards Terence with nightmare slowness ; between one step and the next there yawned an eternity.

John was enjoying himself. This man had been quite unexpectedly given into his hands : this Anti-Christ, his personal enemy and the enemy of mankind, who had murdered his son. John felt an impulse rising within him to strangle this man, and wreak all his fury upon him and kill him. And so he walked very slowly, for he did not want to lose a jot of his triumph.

But at last the long and short way was covered and he was standing face to face with his enemy. Terence still crouched in his corner ; his sweat-drenched face stared up at John, rigid with fear. John raised his hands ; they were large hands and they looked powerful. What a joy it would be to take that man's throat between them and press. He stared fixedly at Terence's fat neck. If he strangled that man he would strangle all the evil in the world at the same time, and he enjoyed that act in anticipation.

During these endless seconds Terence died a thousand deaths. His knees melted ; he could not move. He too could feel the hands round his neck, and it filled him with a horrible mixture of fear and pleasure. Yes, pleasure ; for now he longed for the end, he could not endure the torment of waiting and yearned for the end. And now the end was almost there. For John's powerful brown hands were only a yard from his neck ; in another second they would seize him.

And then, suddenly, his tongue spoke. The tongue which he thought would never speak again moved of

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itself. But what came out was not the round cultured voice of Nero but a wretched, halting stutter, and against his will, indeed almost without his knowledge, it formed the words : "I'm only the potter Terence."

When John heard these words he came to himself. This man the Anti-Christ? This fellow the Anti-Christ? He was only a contemptible quivering mass of fear. John thanked God for having shown him that in time. To destroy such a fellow was unworthy of him ; it was a job for a scavenger, not for a prophet.

When he realised this he let his hands fall, turned away and sat down once more beside the fire. He looked across at Terence. That huddled heap lying in the corner, that nothing, that miserable scarecrow, he had once taken to be the Evil One, and the world had fallen down and worshipped it. John shook his head. His lips twisted beneath his beard. Then he laughed. He laughed almost good-humouredly, deep in his throat but not very loudly, and his laughter was filled with abysmal contempt.

Terence was so terrified that he did not understand John's laughter. The face over there was not merely John's face, but an epitome of all the faces he had feared during his life, his father's face, Caja's, Nero's, Varro's. Boundless astonishment came over him when that face slowly withdrew and grew smaller and left him. It was quite far away now, and he still went on staring at it in bewilderment ; he could not tear his eyes from it.

An eternity passed before he dared to move. The face was no longer looking at him, apparently ; it no longer cut him off from the world ; he could leave this prison now. He got to his feet, it was as though a thousand weights were holding him down ; at last he stood up somewhat unsteadily, astonished that he could stand. He crept to the door bent double, his feet seemed to cling to the floor, and he kept his eyes fastened on John's face.

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His worst problem was how to get past that man. But he managed it, he slipped past with bowed head, filled with deadly fear. He ran to the door in sudden panic lest John's hand should yet descend on his shoulder, or still worse, seize him by the throat and strangle him.

But nothing happened. No hand descended, no blow, no word. There was only a sudden burst of laughter, deep, contemptuous, not very loud laughter. And Terence was boundlessly astonished when he found himself unharmed at the other side of the door, John's laughter still in his ears.

CHAPTER LXXI

THE VOICE OF THE PEOPLE

NERO's mad flight from Edessa damaged his cause more than the most disastrous defeat could have done. His followers felt that they had been made ridiculous, that they had been taken in, and their enthusiasm for Nero all at once changed into fury. They tore down his statues and smashed them to pieces. A huge crowd marched to the rock above the Skirtos, and set about destroying the relief. They enlivened their work with sarcastic jokes and loud laughter, and the fact that the falling blocks of stone killed a few people only heightened their pleasant excitement instead of damping it. The destruction of the relief ended in a sort of orgy. People embraced one another, rejoiced in their deliverance from the yoke of the foreign despot, and sang and shouted and drank to celebrate their new-found freedom.

Then, as if of one mind, they proceeded at once to Knops's house. With the same speed that he had won his popularity he now lost it, for the people suddenly perceived in him the evil spirit of Nero and of Nero's reign.

When Knops saw the threatening crowd gathering in front of his house he sent to his friend Trebonius for help. But before Trebonius could arrive the crowd had over-

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powered the door-keepers. Knops realised that he would have to confront these angry people. He received them familiarly, as one of themselves, and joked with them, hoping by this means to bring them to reason. But inwardly he was quivering with terror. He had wanted to fly the night before, immediately after his attempt to hand Terence over to the Romans had miscarried ; but Jalta had felt ill and the doctors had urgently advised against the journey. So Knops had hesitated, and now the mob had come to cut off his road to safety. He talked to the people, looked on with benevolent tolerance while they set about looting his house, and invited them to drink. He walked about among them with the utmost confidence ; he looked almost pleased to see them. But at the same time he knew that all hope was over. There was no reliance to be put on his friend Trebonius. Perhaps Trebonius wouldn't be altogether displeased if this crowd were to tear him to pieces in their pleasant joking way.

He had been unjust to Trebonius. There was a clatter of arms outside ; that must be the soldiers. But no : he had not been unjust to Trebonius after all. For it was not Trebonius's men, but a troop sent by King Mallukh, and they were a doubtful help. They certainly saved him from the mob and set a guard round him ; but that was merely so as to hold him prisoner.

Knops had been quite right. His friend Trebonius was in no hurry to send him help ; indeed he hoped his help would arrive too late. But the appearance of Mallukh's soldiers altered the position. That was a bit too thick. Where were things coming to when native soldiers actually dared to lift their hands against the counsellors of Nero ? It was only to be expected that the people would kick up a row. But they only needed a knock on the head and they would be quiet again. But when Mallukh's soldiers began to get uppish you couldn't look on quietly, you

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simply had to intervene. He forgot that he was himself to blame for letting things reach this stage ; he simply felt that his fate was bound up with Knops. He wrathfully set out for King Mallukh's palace to speak his mind.

He found the High Priest Sharbil with Mallukh. In these last few weeks while Nero's rule was so visibly tottering Sharbil had several times tried to persuade the King that the hour had come to deliver up Nero to Cejonius in return for a confirmation of the status quo. But Mallukh, at heart an Arab, had rigid views on the inviolability of the laws of hospitality, so he had ignored the cogent arguments of his Chancellor with the same impassive dignity as he had listened to his hints after the night of the 15th of May. In these last weeks it had looked, moreover, as if his honourable behaviour might yet be to his advantage. Reliable reports had arrived from the distant East that Artaban had won a decisive military victory over his enemy Pakor. And if the King of Parthia could throw troops to the western frontier in sufficient force, even Domitian and his generals would think twice before they crossed the Euphrates. So it might be wise to stick to Nero for the time being, and refrain from hasty decisions. But now Nero's stupid flight had destroyed all hope of this policy for good. After such a primitive outburst of popular rage Nero's rule in Mesopotamia was doomed.

Yet that outburst brought some good with it. For by being directed against Knops it gave Mallukh and Sharbil the chance they had longed for to lay the fellow by the heels. They had him now, and that was all to the good. For if Artaban, as seemed almost certain, had won a decisive victory in the East, Rome would negotiate with Edessa before taking any action, and then, to show their good-will, they could offer to hand over Nero's Chancellor at least. And since Knops was only a slave, King Mallukh,

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in spite of his rigid views on hospitality, would have no scruples about that.

The King and the High Priest had come to this stage in their deliberations when Trebonius clattered in. After Nero's cowardly flight they felt in no mood to treat his servants with special consideration, and so responded to the loud and angry words of the General with stiff dignity.

To his complaints Sharbil replied that the officer who had arrested Knops had in no way overstepped his powers, but had acted with the knowledge and on the instructions of the Government. It was only too understandable that the people of Edessa should be furious at Knops's greed and violence, and refuse to submit to them any longer, after the Emperor had left him to their mercies by his flight.

Not till then did Trebonius realise how gravely Nero's flight endangered his own position. He was a hot-tempered man but enough of a soldier to weigh up his chances quickly, and he knew that he could have no hope in a street fight against the population of Edessa and Mallukh's troops. "If that's what you think, High Priest," he said challengingly, but already prepared to make concessions, "why don't you have me arrested too?" The old man said nothing, but glanced ironically, or so it seemed to Trebonius, at the King. For the first time since Trebonius's entrance the King now opened his mouth and said: "Don't be afraid, Captain. We won't arrest you." He said this quite calmly and quite without irony. But Trebonius felt as if he had been given a knock on the head. What hurt him most was the King calling him Captain instead of General. Mallukh could not have adopted a more simple and effective way of putting things back to where they were at first. At the moment when he addressed Trebonius as Captain, Trebonius dwindled into a petty provincial officer, just as Nero by his flight had

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dwindled into a slave ; but Mallukh had been born to kingship. Trebonius did not dare to protest ; he held his tongue ; more, he had to fight down an impulse to thank the King for his forbearance.

After a pause Sharbil annotated Mallukh's words. The King of Edessa, he announced, must ask Captain Trebonius to withdraw with his men to the Citadel ; he gave him three hours in which to do so. The King did not wish Trebonius to meet the same fate at the people's hands as Knops. The Captain would therefore be wise to take advantage of the reprieve granted him.

Trebonius left in great dejection, cursing, bewildered, but obedient.

CHAPTER LXXII

FAREWELL TO EDESSA

THE only man in Edessa who did not regard Nero's flight as a catastrophe was the Senator Varro. The success of Artaban in the East had renewed his almost dead hopes, and he refused to admit to himself that this last stupid exploit of his creature had ruined the prospects which Artaban's victory created. On the contrary, he considered it all to the good that the person of Nero could be left out of account for the time being, and with that Knops and Trebonius got rid of finally.

He did not take the revolt of the people of Edessa seriously. Once Artaban's victory was confirmed, they could easily convince the masses that Nero's journey was not a flight, and that the Emperor had merely wished to pay a visit to the King of Parthia to discuss how the great victory in the East could be exploited to win an equally decisive victory in the West.

He walked up and down in Marcia's room thinking all this aloud. He stepped up to her, took her head in his hands, and bent it back so as to see her more clearly. "It wasn't a stupid blunder," he assured her, "to let yourself be married to that creature. What I promised you will come true yet. You'll make your entry into the Palatine yet." In his mind he had already transferred

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the centre of his campaign from Edessa to Ktesiphon, the capital of Parthia, and from that centre he now surveyed it anew and saw it prospering as never before.

Yes, he went on, he could leave this wretched town of Edessa now and make Ktesiphon his residence. Not that he felt he was in the least danger in Edessa, like those fellows Knops and Trebonius; but the point had come when he must collaborate personally with Artaban. It had been a bad piece of negligence to let such a long time pass without speaking to the King personally. He had negotiated with ambassadors and ministers, but he knew far too little of the actual personality of the Great King, he didn't even know what he looked like. He must see the man's face. He had every hope that he might be able to show the Great King a few tricks and give him some useful hints.

As for Terence, he seemed to be wandering about somewhere in the wilderness, by all appearances. Reliable news couldn't be had, but a fellow like Terence would come to no harm, he wasn't important enough for that; the gods didn't bother about such nonentities, and Varro believed too firmly in his own star to attach much importance to the fate of his creature. No doubt Terence would arrive unhurt at the court of the Great King after his wanderings. It would be advisable for Varro to receive him there in person and keep a strict eye on him.

Yes, Nero's flight, which had produced such a panic among his other followers, gave new hope to Varro. He immediately began to prepare for his move to the court of the Great King. But he wished to avoid all risk of his departure from Edessa being taken for a flight. So he called on King Mallukh, intending to discuss everything frankly and peaceably with him before he left Edessa.

To do this required some courage. Optimistically as Varro regarded his adventure as a whole, he was not

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blind to the particular dangers attached to it. There was a possibility that King Mallukh might try to hold him as a hostage, and thus strengthen his hands for his negotiations with Rome. But Varro would simply have to take that risk. He could not appear at Artaban's court as a fugitive. He must clear things up in Edessa before he left.

So the three men once more sat together in the fountain-room. The conversation, as usual, began with trivialities, and neither Varro nor the other two mentioned what was in all their minds—that is, Nero's flight. At last, after a seemingly interval, Varro began: "I beg Your Majesty to give me leave of absence. The departure of the Emperor compels me also to leave Edessa for some time."

There was a long silence. Sharbil gazed at the King, waiting for him to speak. At last the King said more sadly than ironically: "So you call it a departure?" And Sharbil added in his shrill spiteful voice: "We would have been better pleased if that departure had taken place a little less suddenly and if we had been informed of it, since the Emperor has enjoyed for so long our protection and our friendly hospitality. It might be well to take precautionary measures against being surprised in future by the sudden decisions of Romans." And he shot out his fleshless head threateningly at Varro. Varro did not budge. "Does that mean," he asked, "that you intend to keep me here against my will?" He looked at the King.

But the King replied in a despondent voice and with a slight trace of irony: "You are making a mistake." And Sharbil had again to annotate his master's words, though that was obviously an unwelcome task to him: "You mistake the heart of our gracious King. What I said just now did not mean that we shall try to keep you here. On the contrary, it was intended as an apology for not resisting more warmly the wish of our guest to leave us. For I

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cannot conceal the fact that we shall regard your departure with a certain satisfaction. After what you have called Nero's departure, the King will find it difficult to guarantee your safety. It is far from our wish to class you with such wretched creatures as Knops and Trebonius. But the rabble haven't very keen eyes, and one Roman looks to them very like another. The King would never have driven you from his hearth ; but as you yourself wish to leave he will not try to keep you." And the King added in his quiet grave voice : "No, I shall not try to keep you."

As Mallukh said this Varro realised that in the eyes of these two men his adventure had miserably failed, and that they had a perfect right to hold him by force for having drawn them into it. But instead of doing that they were letting him go and actually begging his forgiveness for their failure in courtesy. Could one find such greatness of spirit anywhere except in this incomprehensible East ? Varro was not sentimental ; but he felt moved, and he bowed deeply to the two men with his arms crossed over his breast in the Eastern fashion.

After a long silence Sharbil began again : "But where, my Varro, can you turn now ? There aren't many roads still open to you." "As my Emperor is now on his way to the Great King Artaban," replied Varro, "I also consider it my duty to take that road." "So he is on his way to Artaban?" the High Priest asked sarcastically ; his yellow, parchment-like brow was even more wrinkled than usual, and his dyed, forked beard hung lifelessly from his withered lips. But King Mallukh said : "You are wise to make for the East. It will be better for you, and for me too, if Domitian has to demand your person from Artaban instead of from us ; for the Great King's residence is farther from Antioch than mine, and he has a stouter cloak to hide you under than I can give you. I shall give you an

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armed escort and conduct you safely to Artaban's court. Perhaps the road is not so safe as you think."

As the King was speaking Varro became conscious of a feeling that he had not known for a long time, a feeling akin to piety. How nobly this Eastern king was taking his leave of him, a leave for which he had asked out of pure calculation. These men of the East were better than the Romans, more humane, more sensitive. Varro stepped back and gazed at the King and the High Priest; he contemplated Mallukh's face with its serene lines, the arched brows and the curved fleshy nose, and Sharbil's wrinkled skull to which the pointed priest's hat seemed to have grown. "I thank you, my King and patron," he said, "and you, High Priest, for bearing me no grudge because I induced you to support this man Nero." Mallukh returned his glance and replied: "I bear you no grudge." And both he and Sharbil greeted their departing guest by raising both hands with the palms turned towards him, knowing that he was probably leaving them for ever.

With his daughter Marcia and the casket containing his papers Varro set out towards the south-east for the court of King Artaban.

CHAPTER LXXIII

THE GREAT KING

AT Ktesiphon, the western capital of Parthia, the authorities refused to let him proceed further, and instructed him to wait until the Great King returned from his victorious campaign.

Varro therefore waited. He had talks with ministers about his Nero, produced the letter from the dead Parthian King, the great Vologaes, in which that ruler expressed his admiration and gratitude for Varro's wisdom, which had concluded the war between Rome and Parthia. But in spite of their politeness the Parthian ministers seemed to regard his affair as much less important than he had hoped. It took him some time to realise that, seen from Ktesiphon, this business of Nero lost a great deal of its importance. He was accustomed to the swarming peoples of Rome; but from Ktesiphon it was a wider world that opened before him. The Parthians had relations with peoples of whom he scarcely knew the names, and whose names he would never learn to pronounce properly. Ambassadors from Scythia, even from China were waiting at the court to pay their homage to the Great King. Varro realised that Rome itself was not the centre of the world for the court of Ktesiphon, far

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less, therefore, the unreal Rome of Nero. There were times when he felt like a provincial, and then he lost all hope of effecting anything here.

But when the Great King returned Varro was granted an audience much sooner than he had expected.

The Court ceremonial of the Parthians was strict. A curtain concealed one end of the huge throne-room. The King's guards were posted along the walls, and the nobles stood in a half-circle with their faces turned towards the curtain. Then a voice announced: "His Majesty the King of Kings is seated", the curtain was drawn back, and the Great King became visible.

He was sitting, surrounded by priests, on a golden throne glittering with precious stones; the sacred fire burned at his side. His robes were heavy and stiff with jewels. A crown hung over his head, supported on thick ropes fixed to the ceiling. The greater part of his face was covered with a huge, artificially curled beard powdered with gold dust.

As soon as the King was announced the nobles fell on their faces, and Varro too knelt down. He handed his petition to the King. Artaban commanded it to be read, and then said that he would give it his favourable consideration. The curtain was thereupon drawn and the glittering apparition of Eastern splendour vanished almost before Varro had heard its voice. The audience seemed to be over.

It was not over. Varro, disappointed that the Great King had not even addressed a few personal words to him, was now informed that His Majesty would receive him at once in a second and private audience.

The courtiers and the guards withdrew. Varro remained alone in the great throne-room.

Suddenly a little gentleman stepped out from behind the curtain. He had a round head, and his beardless face

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was very pale ; his hair was pitch black. Varro recognised the Great King only by his robes.

With his crown and beard the King seemed to have put away his majesty, and he addressed Varro easily and informally. Without ceremony he came to the point and began at once to talk of the "experiment", as he called the campaign to establish Nero. His Greek was bad, often he had to pause to find the right word, yet he managed to express his thoughts with the utmost precision. His opinion was that the chief blame for the miscarriage of the experiment lay in Nero's unreliability in the matter of his divine majesty. "That divine majesty of his," he said somewhat ironically, "seems to leave him at times. My chief Magian tells me that such a thing is impossible. But he is wrong. The example of your Nero proves it. When your Nero decided for that night of murder, and when he fled from Edessa, it's clear that his divine majesty couldn't have been with him. You, my Varro, as an experienced statesman, should really have seen to it that your Nero made no decisions on days when he was without his divine majesty."

Varro was not used to such curious political and theological problems, and he divined in the King's words the concealed irony of a man who knew more about them than he did. He realised with some discomfort that this king, though he viewed events from the distance, had hit upon the chief error which he, Varro, had made, an error which he had never been willing to admit to himself. For in his petty private quarrel with Knops and Trebonius he had lost sight of the most important factor of all: that is Terence, with all his whims and tricks. In incomprehensible blindness he had overlooked the fact that a man without ideas and without personality must acquire importance and even personality at the moment when power is given into his hands. The function of exercising

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power necessarily changed the nature of the man who exercised it. Power, public credit, fame, created personality even in men who had been endowed with none. He should have realised that, he should have told himself that. But he had not realised it, or else he had not wished to admit it. And though the Great King had spoken in the most friendly way, it was clear that he had discerned his error, his unforgivable omission.

He had believed in his stupid vanity that the Parthian King was merely waiting for his wise advice. He had come here to teach this king and give him a few useful hints ; yet Artaban had a much keener insight into human nature and political actualities than he.

Varro was at least prepared to admit frankly that he had made a false step. It would be stupid to try to hide the fact in vague phrases. So without any attempt at defence he admitted his fault and said : "You are right, Your Majesty. I deserve your rebuke."

Artaban seemed to be pleased by this honest admission. He did not pursue the painful subject and turned to Varro with the friendly words : "Well, my dear Varro, and now tell me what you think of the chances of your Nero since he cleared out of Edessa ?" He used the phrase, "Cleared out of Edessa", and the colloquialism sounded strange in his laborious Greek.

The King's words made Varro feel completely at a loss. What a stupid situation he had let himself be manœuvred into. There he sat, the long-nosed experienced Roman, and he had come here to persuade this clever king that the Parthian Empire would be gravely endangered if it did not make huge sacrifices in money and blood to maintain Nero. How was he to manage that ? Even to attempt it would be stupid, as well as quite hopeless. Yet here he was, and he must do what he could.

So he plucked up his courage and began to repeat

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some of the points he had thought out, points which he had already put before the Parthian King in countless letters. Unlike the Flavian Emperors, Nero would honourably keep his treaty of friendship with Parthia, and that for very obvious reasons, foreign and domestic. Nero's friends knew that civilisation could be defended against the northern barbarians only by an alliance with Parthia. But his words sounded lame to him; it made him blush to bring out these cheap platitudes before the King.

And he had not gone far when Artaban interrupted him with a polite but decided wave of the hand. "My dear Varro," he said, "these general considerations are not unknown to me. I also know all the counter arguments against them, the errors of your Nero, for instance, when he forgets his divine majesty, and the many snags involved in sending you more troops and money. The one thing about which I am not quite clear is this: what reason there exists now for continuing to support you. I should like you to enlighten me about that as Nero's ambassador."

Faced with this sober question, Varro felt like a schoolboy who has not learned his lesson, and the indulgent way in which the Great King dismissed his first blunder did not make it more easy for him to answer. The only thing that could help him here was frankness and honesty. He admitted that after the flight of the Emperor he had himself given up his original belief that Nero would reach the Palatine. But he still believed that it was possible to unite the petty states between the Tigris and the Euphrates and even a considerable part of the territory beyond the Euphrates into a great intermediate Empire under one ruler, who would combine in himself the popularity of Nero and a hearty devotion to the Great King.

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"Yes," replied Artaban, "that's pretty much how I see the situation too. At best I might be able to strengthen my influence in Mesopotamia. That is to say," he went on, softening the severity of his explanation by expressing it in the most courteous terms, "I could gain at best very little in comparison with the enormous sacrifice demanded if I took the great risk of supporting your Nero. You yourself tacitly admit this in what you have just said."

Varro was silent. There was nothing he could say in reply to the King's words. He had lost the game. He was finished. "Must I return to Edessa, then?" he asked, and his pale cheeks showed how hard it was for him to draw this conclusion.

"You needn't play the hero before me," replied the Great King almost crossly. "You know quite well that if you return to Edessa you will be arrested and probably be put to death. It goes without saying that I should be delighted to have at my court a man who showed a great service to my predecessor Vologaes, and who supported me when I was struggling for power. You and your Nero will always be welcome here as my guests. But I am sorry to say that the hospitality I can offer you is a circumscribed hospitality. For if you ever endanger the peace of my country I shall have to ask you to go."

"Is such a thing conceivable?" asked Varro somewhat foolishly. "It is extremely probable," replied Artaban. "If Domitian is wise he will institute trade relations with me and raise no objection to a reasonable military compromise in Mesopotamia. But if he should make it a condition of that compromise that I must withdraw my protection from you and your Nero, then I should not feel justified in rejecting that condition. One can't imperil the peace of two hundred million human beings for the sake of an individual. Lucius Terentius Varro must realise that."

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Varro realised it. What the Great King said was as clear and definite as his Greek was stumbling. Nevertheless the clever, honest and humane King was asking a great deal of him. He was not only prepared to deliver him up; he asked him to approve the act.

Varro tried to clarify his mind as he paced up and down in Marcia's room. "There remains now," he said, with an ironical smile, "only one hope for me, that our friend Jumping Jack will make some blunder and force Artaban to support Nero again. The pity of it is that I have done a good deal to teach Jumping Jack better ways and drive the nonsense out of him."

He viewed his adventure from beginning to end, and he blamed himself for having conducted it so exclusively according to Western standards instead of Eastern ones. He had always fancied that he could see farther than other people, and yet like the most narrow-minded Roman he had confined his thoughts to the Empire. At bottom he had shown himself to be a crass nationalist, filled with insolent confidence that the whole world must rejoice if Rome took any interest in it. Now, too late, he realised how great the world was and how small Rome.

But already the old gambling instinct was beginning to waken in him again. "One is always learning," he decided. "I taught Jumping Jack and now he is teaching me. I remember we banished a writer once from Rome, Musonius or Dio of Prusa, I can't remember which, and the banishment seemed a matter of no importance to me. But now that Jumping Jack has forced me to emigrate, I am beginning to see that the centre of the world is not where one happens to be born, and that it has as many centres as it has people living in it."

CHAPTER LXXIV

THE FUGITIVE

ONE of these centres of the world, Nero-Terence, was meanwhile wandering about on its surface. On the night that he encountered John he had set out from Edessà and journeyed a good distance into the wilderness. He remained concealed next day, and next night walked on again, keeping his face constantly towards the south-east ; the third night he did the same. He was glad to be alone. The solitude of the wilderness gave him a chance to patch together his damaged majesty again. On the third day he suffered severely from hunger and thirst ; but his majesty was now completely rehabilitated, so that he could wrap himself comfortably in it. He told himself that the splendour emanating from him had kept that savage John from laying hands upon him, and that destiny would never let him come to harm. Next day he was seized by Bedouins ; by this time he was on the verge of exhaustion.

The Bedouins were surly fellows. When he informed them that he was making for the court of the Great King they asked suspiciously what he wanted there, and when he began to address them in his usual pompous style they decided he was a fraud, perhaps an escaped slave, and ordered him to do their menial work for them. Nursing his divine majesty, he made no response to the order, but

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simply turned away, took a few steps and sat down on the ground. They struck him ; but he clung to his silent resistance. Finally the dignified gravity with which he bore their ill-treatment and his wretched situation made an impression upon them. For his frequent protestations that he was the Emperor Nero they had only a contemptuous smile. Yet they could not help comparing his face with that on the coin, and they began to fear they had committed a great mistake. They sold their inconvenient captive to another tribe.

Nero accepted all that came with indifference. He regarded his very misery as a sign that the gods confirmed his claims. To know completely what empire was, to be Nero to the bitter end, he must experience Nero's fall as well as his rise and glory. So he welcomed the misfortunes that now broke over him as he had welcomed his former good luck, and patiently bore the humiliations which the second Bedouin tribe inflicted on him. His quiet claim to be the Emperor began to produce an effect on his new masters too, they thought him more a fool than a knave, and as they regarded fools both with contempt and with religious awe, they jeered at him yet stood in fear of him. But they could not get used to their strange guest, and they were glad when an opportunity came to get rid of him.

And then began Nero's long and painful wanderings through the desert. Several times he was almost at the end of his strength ; yet that horrible pilgrimage completed his transformation into Nero. He experienced extreme exhaustion and despair, and these steeled his faith that he was that perfect representative of mankind, the Emperor Nero himself.

After many wretched and absurd adventures he finally reached the subterranean desert town of Homa, half dead with thirst. He found nothing there but old

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men, women and children ; the young men had gone away on a pillaging expedition. His weeks in Homa were happy. The women and children could not make out whether he was a knave, a fool, or a great noble fallen into misfortune ; but they liked him, and as he sat in his cave there went out from him a mild dignity and majesty. They would gather round him and gaze at him for a long time with timid curiosity. And sometimes, if they begged him long enough, he would open his mouth and tell them stories. He was a splendid story-teller. The people of Homa listened entranced to their curious guest and decided to keep him in the town until the young men returned and said what was to be done with him.

But before they could return, messengers arrived from the Great King. Once Artaban had made up his mind to recognise Nero for the time being, he sent out his cleverest spies to seek for him, and they soon succeeded in doing what Varro's agents had failed to do : they found his place of concealment. And when they arrived, to the great astonishment of the people of Homa they prostrated themselves before the stranger, touched the ground with their foreheads and saluted him as the ruler of the Western world.

Nero was not in the least surprised at the Great King's messengers paying him such honour. He had fled from Edessa alone and disguised. He would make his entrance into Ktesiphon with an Imperial escort. That was as it should be, and gave no cause for surprise. The world was a well-ordered world, and everything that had happened to him proved it. It was the gods' will that a new Nero, hitherto concealed from men's eyes, should now appear, the consummated Nero ; and that was why all these things had happened. The wheel had come full circle. His soul was armoured now against both glory and misery, as the soul of an Emperor must needs be. He was one with his

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fate, he knew its meaning, and nothing now could touch him.

So with perfect composure he permitted Artaban's emissaries to clothe him in fine robes and solemnly conduct him to Ktesiphon. During the whole long journey he was treated with the most profound reverence. The people he passed felt the breath of majesty that went out from him, though he looked so bored and absorbed in himself. They flung themselves on the ground as he passed and beat their brows on the earth as if he were the Great King himself.

Even Varro was surprised when he encountered his Nero in Ktesiphon. The hardships of the last few months had made Nero thinner, his face was less puffy, and a few white strands could be seen in his reddish fair hair. On his lips was a weary, superior, indulgent smile. It was hard to find an answer to that smile. A faint aura of madness seemed to surround him. This was no longer Varro's creature, and it was doubtful whether by using all his perseverance and cunning Varro would be able to tame this new Terence.

Nero spoke less than before, more slowly and weightily. He hardly ever looked at people through his emerald now. He was no longer curious about people; he had seen everything that could be seen, and required no more than a glance to perceive the real nature of a man or a situation. He was less surly in his pride; indeed, his unapproachability was tempered by a certain benevolence. After measuring all the heights and depths of life, he could no longer be impressed or deceived by anything.

And he felt no compunction now at the thought of meeting the Great King, though at one time he had shrunk from it in terror.

Yet when he found himself in Artaban's throne-room his majesty grew somewhat dimmer, it could not be

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denied. A frieze ran round the room on which the deeds of the ancient Persian kings were described ; it was in exquisite taste despite its huge proportions, and more splendid than any other work of the kind that he had ever seen. He was still more impressed by the enormous cupola where Mithras was shown in mosaic overcoming the evil spirits. As he stood under that cupola Nero seemed to shrink, and with a gnawing feeling of shame he remembered the statues of Mithras which had been a speciality of the factory in the Red Street.

And then began the splendid and ceremonious ritual which was designed to impress upon everyone the unique divine glory of the Eastern ruler. The curtain parted, the crown appeared hanging in the air, the priests stood round in a half circle with their golden beards, the sacred fire burned, the nobles flung themselves on their faces. Nero had to summon all his resolution to remain erect when everyone else was prostrate, and in his ears rang the words of the song :

A Potter belongs to the mass,
Not to the ruling class,
He should stick to his clay and his ass.

But when Artaban descended to talk to his friend, the Emperor of the Western world, that blinding majesty, before which even Nero had been forced to lower his eyes, was suddenly quenched. No, a man with such a sober prosaic voice had no right to the name of majesty. With profound satisfaction Nero recognised that he was the only man on the earth who really had a claim to that.

CHAPTER LXXV

JUSTICE, THE FOUNDATION OF STATES

CEJONIUS was radiant. Terence and Varro had fled, Philip and Mallukh were prepared to negotiate, which was to say that they offered their submission in the usual flowery Eastern terms. The victorious Artaban still remained, however. But Cejonius had learned his lesson and decided to cancel his previous decision and acknowledge Artaban. On the strength of his army he hoped to extort all sorts of concessions from the Great King as the price of his recognition, among them the surrender of Varro and Terence. He would smoke the two rascals out of their last hiding hole. But he curbed his impatience and went on strengthening his position. Only when he had done that would he treat with Artaban, that is, only when Artaban knew that he was empowered by Rome to march if necessary. With boyish impatience he waited for his instructions from Rome.

They were somewhat different from what he had expected. Domitian instructed him to get the army ready for an advance into Mesopotamia. But the letter went on :

We do not propose to entrust you with any further instructions. Instead we must request you, as soon as you have prepared the army for immediate action, to hand over

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your office, along with the axe and fasces, to the new Governor whom we have appointed to rule over our province of Syria. Once that has been done we desire you to report to us in Rome.

When Jumping Jack realised the meaning of these words he seemed to collapse. It was a bright spring day, but to him the whole world seemed dark. He had grown five years younger in the last few months, but that minute added ten years to his age. Mad plans bubbled in his brain. He, dry conscientious official though he was, dreamed for a moment of joining the rebels, of going over to Varro and Nero. But while these fancies were floating before him he knew they were a dream, and for a long time he sat on, quite empty. Spin on, reel. A new Governor would cross the Euphrates at the head of the army he had furbished up so splendidly, his army, and lead it back again in triumph to Antioch. And he, Cejonius, would decay in Rome, an aging nonentity, and the only thing that would remain of him in the East would be his nickname: Jumping Jack.

Cejonius's life had lost its meaning. But he was a conscientious official, and he went on doing his duty.

In a few weeks the new Governor appeared. It was Rufus Atilius, a young man with a smooth face from which nothing could be read, of faultless manners and composed bearing. He said a few cool appreciative words regarding the excellent organisation of the army and begged Cejonius to postpone handing over the insignia of his office until he, Atilius, had got thoroughly used to his new duties.

The following few weeks were painful for Cejonius. He sat in his palace clothed in the robes of power. But it was that other man, that insignificant young whipper-snapper, to whom the letters of the Emperor and the

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Senate were sent, and all the world knew that he had been dismissed. He had failed, he was responsible for all this mix up, and so they had had to send the other man here to straighten out his mistakes. Yet he had to go on pretending, had to go on receiving people and putting his signature to documents.

He longed for the day when he could sail away and be rid of the sneering faces of these Orientals. But he had been brought up in the tenets of the Stoa, and so he kept a stiff upper lip and did his duty. Rufus Atilius sent word to Rome that he was getting on quite well with Jumping Jack ; the fellow was quite a passable official.

But one day that passable official suddenly lost the calm bearing which he had maintained so painfully. And this happened without any visible cause. Rufus Atilius had merely enquired the best way of conveying a letter from the Senate to Varro without causing diplomatic complications. Cejonius immediately got red in the face and asked in a strained voice if he might be told what the letter was about. Certainly, replied Rufus Atilius, and he told him. The Senate had pronounced its verdict on a complaint which Varro had sent to it regarding an Inspection Tax he had been wrongly forced to pay. The Senate's decision was that the complaint must be upheld, it was a case of being taxed twice for the same object, and the Treasury must return to Varro the six thousand sesterces it had wrongly demanded from him. Rome considered it very important, Atilius went on, that this verdict should be conveyed to Varro along with his death sentence for high treason.

And then a curious thing happened. Cejonius the Stoic, who had borne many a hard blow of fate with such composure, swallowed several times, and began to scratch the palm of one hand with the nails of the other in deep agitation. And when Atilius made some trivial remark to

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ease the embarrassing situation Cejonius suddenly got up, gasped out : "Excuse me," and rushed from the room.

Rufus Atilius shook his head. So there must be something in the story that the East could knock even the most sensible man off his balance and make him behave queerly.

CHAPTER LXXVI

REAL POLITICS

BEFORE Rufus Atilius took over the insignia of office he resolved to come to an agreement with Artaban. Any doubts about Artaban's legitimacy, he wrote, had been resolved by the fact that the gods had given him victory, and Rome was prepared in principle to renew with him as the accredited ruler of Parthia their traditional treaty of friendship. But before this happened the differences which had arisen recently between the two empires must be liquidated. Rome had injured the good relations existing between the two powers by recognising Pakor, and Artaban had also helped to do this by recognising the fraudulent Terence. The Governor hoped that Artaban would disavow that swindler as unequivocally as Rome now disavowed the pretender Pakor. He therefore besought the Great King to deprive the traitor of the hospitality which he had so shamefully abused and deliver him up along with the former Senator Varro to Rome.

Artaban's reply was dilatory. He was prepared, he said, to consider delivering up this man whom so many people regarded as the rightful Emperor; but before doing so Rome must pledge itself not to injure in any way his allies the Mesopotamian princes and lords who had followed his example in supporting Nero.

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On the basis of this correspondence a long and arduous series of negotiations began. Rufus Atilius was prepared to assure the Mesopotamian princes immunity for their offences, but in return he demanded permission to strengthen the Roman garrisons in their towns. Thereupon Artaban suggested that some consideration should be given to his own strategic position in Mesopotamia. Each party knew that the other would not let the negotiations fall through, each bluffed and was not taken in by the other's bluff, and each was prepared to wait. Weeks went by before they at last reached the point where the treaty could be given its definitive form.

But finally that point was reached and now all that remained was to fix the day on which it should be ratified.

At this stage Artaban sent for Varro. Varro already knew that Artaban would not run the risk of a war with Rome simply to save his life and Nero's. Varro also knew of the negotiations and that he would probably be delivered up to Rome at their conclusion. So he was prepared for the worst and had come to a decision. He loved life and did not lay much importance on dignity; nevertheless, when the treaty was closed, nothing would remain for him but to swallow gold leaf or open an artery. He understood and approved of the Great King's decision; yet he saw in him now merely the judge, the hangman, the enemy, and he had a sick feeling in his stomach, and his knees grew weak.

The Great King talked in his sober way of the negotiations, produced a draft of the treaty, and requested Varro to read it through quietly and tell him what he thought of it.

So Varro read it and saw at once what it meant. This treaty regulating the military, political and economic relations between the two empires to the smallest detail had been drawn up by two men who were convinced that

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understanding was better than war, and for the sake of that understanding they were both prepared to concede a little more than they needed to concede, and to claim a little less than they could have claimed. It was a wise and just agreement, far-sighted, neither too rigid nor too elastic, and on the basis of that agreement peace between Rome and Parthia might be maintained for many a long day. Yet he could not overlook the fact that in that wise and honourable agreement there was a clause by which the Great King pledged himself to deliver up to the Roman authorities the men Terentius Maximus and Terentius Varro.

The document was long and contained many paragraphs. Varro took a long time to read it ; the Great King sat on quietly and did not disturb him. Varro read on, page after page ; his brown eyes kept moving intently from left to right and then quickly back again, as he perused it line by line. He sat with his legs crossed in the lax fashion of the East. He read attentively and did not miss a single point. And that surprised him ; for as he read he was thinking many things. "So this is my death sentence," he was thinking. "It's a perfectly reasonable sentence and it would be stupid to appeal against it. Should I swallow some gold leaf, or should I open an artery ? My heart is beating very loudly. Can the King have noticed it ? I must breathe more deeply to keep him from hearing. There's no point in letting him see how agitated I am ; it will only harm my chances. And why should I be so excited ? I've foreseen all this for a long time."

This was what he was thinking, but he had learned to control himself, and so he managed to reply calmly : "This treaty is the wisest one that has ever been made between Rome and Parthia since the two peoples first came to an understanding with each other." "Yes," said

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Artaban, "it would be madness, it would be a crime, if I let it fall through." "I agree that it would be a crime," replied Varro.

But now Artaban turned his reflective eyes full upon Varro and said: "I like you, my Varro, and you deserve well of me for what you did once to bring peace between Parthia and Rome. I am very unwilling to deliver you up."

"What is he after?" thought Varro. "Does he want to wrap up the death sentence in flowery words? No, he isn't the man to do that sort of thing. Best for me to say nothing." And he contented himself with shrugging his shoulders.

A short silence followed. Then Artaban said slowly: "You once showed me a letter, my Varro, in which my great predecessor Vologaes expressed his gratitude for what you had done to bring peace between Rome and Parthia. I should like to include that letter in my archives. I make you an offer. If you let me have that letter, I'll see that you have a chance to disappear from my court and vanish in the eastern parts of my empire before I sign the treaty."

Varro was a man of quick decision. But although he had listened attentively, he could not understand the King's words or else did not dare to understand them; for everything was dancing before his eyes. Then at last—perhaps two seconds after the Great King had finished, but to him it seemed an eternity—he understood. He had been as good as dead; and now a man had come to him and said: "Arise and live", a man who had the power to say these words.

Had he the power? And would he stick to his decision? Mightn't he take it back again? Varro felt confident one moment and doubtful the next; he was tossed up and down like a ship in a storm.

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And now he could not quite manage to keep his voice steady, and it trembled as he replied: "Forgive me, Your Majesty, but I don't quite understand. If I leave your court and fly to the East, as you suggest in your great mercy, will that gain anything more for me than a short reprieve?" He tried to assume a jesting tone: "You think too well of the men of the West. We are very thorough and very revengeful. I don't think Rome will leave you and me in peace while I am alive, once you have signed that paper."

The Parthian King replied in his laborious Greek, with the ghost of a smile: "Oh, I know you men of the West, my Varro. But you don't know the distant East. At my farthest frontiers, just before you reach India, there are pilgrims and monks who wander about without a roof over their heads. These men have no names, they come and go, they could almost be taken for one another. If you become one of these men nobody will ever find you, not even the cleverest spy from the West."

Varro's thoughts were in confusion. He had heard of the men the Great King spoke about. They wore yellow robes, went about barefoot, and carried bowls made of the shell of some strange fruit to hold the alms the people gave them. The excitement of his first surprise had not yet died down in Varro, his jubilation at not having to die still vibrated in him; yet a deep loathing at the thought of a life of such poverty and beggary rose in him now. But simultaneously he felt a curiosity to try that life and see what it was like. During these last few weeks wasn't that what he had really wanted, to taste new experiences, to view the world from another centre? If he penetrated yet more deeply into the East, that would only be in line with his wishes. He had lived for so long in the turmoil of action; he had done things. And if fate decided now that he should try the other thing,

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that he should contemplate life, he had no reason for complaint, but only for gratitude. Of course he had no intention of giving up life entirely like these yellow-robed men. He would not join their ranks as a man who had renounced his desires but rather as one who was resolved yet to fulfil them. Regarded in that way, the life which lay before him was not repellent, but rather attractive. To join the other side. To rise above action, not be involved in it. It would do him good to become one of those people whom he had never known, one of the anonymous crowd whom he had contemplated until now only from above.

Meanwhile Artaban went on : "Among these homeless men there are naturally many who do not belong to the lower classes. Some of them, before they voluntarily chose to live without a roof above their heads, owned a very solid one, in fact in some cases a golden one. There are prefects among them, princes, generals, and ancient tradition says that there have even been kings among them."

While Artaban was speaking a new hope began to rise in Varro without his being clearly aware of it. He wasn't old still, and he had seen many changes. This life in the East, which the Great King praised up so much, would not be his last phase. Beyond doubt he would emerge again from his obscurity and return to the world of active life, and perhaps take up his work more wisely and effectively than ever before.

But the King misconstrued Varro's silence and began to fear that he had come to some dark decision, which might weigh on the King's conscience if it were carried out. So he continued in a tone which he tried to make light, but which sounded somewhat strained : "I have been told and I have seen with my own eyes that some Romans in your position cast their lives away needlessly and embrace

a voluntary death. I would be very sorry, my Varro, and very disappointed, if you were to do that. I have only a vague notion of how Romans think of the next world. But for my own part I am inclined to be sceptical, and I am very much afraid there is none." And like a man dissuading another from a bad bargain by suggesting a better, he went on with a faint sigh : "The most convenient thing for me, of course, would be to let you follow the teaching of your Stoics and die. But you have rendered valuable services to my country, and I like you. Be reasonable, my Varro."

Varro pricked up his ears. Wasn't this richly funny ? The man was not only offering him a chance to live but actually begging him to seize it. More, as Artaban put it, he would appear to be doing the man a favour by remaining alive. He laughed inwardly at such a delicious jest of fate. He refrained, however, from explaining it to the King ; he wanted to enjoy it by himself. And it was fortunate that he did. For after a short pause Artaban went on confidentially, with a sly smile : "And besides, there are many different ways of living without a roof over your head. For instance, if you have the good-will of the Great King and his visible favour, you can live in comparative comfort in spite of being in such a roofless state."

Varro could hardly keep from expressing his enormous relief ; he would have liked to laugh and slap his leg. For this King, this monarch of the East, was not only urging him to accept his gift, but also offering to lighten his life in every possible way. Varro at once regained his old assurance and enquired with affected hesitation and a familiarity which the Great King had probably never encountered during these last years : "Are there any means of informing Your Majesty's authorities in the far East that I am looked upon with favour by Your

Majesty?" And Artaban, relieved that the other man had listened to better counsel, replied eagerly: "Naturally I shall drop a word to the head men in my frontier province that a certain wandering monk from the West is not an ordinary monk, but a protégé of the Great King." And then at last Varro magnanimously decided to accept the fate which an hour before had seemed to him such a piece of unimaginable good fortune, and said modestly, but in the tone of one who grants a favour: "I will not venture to refuse the desire of Your Majesty."

With the serene courtesy which made his people love him Artaban replied: "I thank you for your decision and I shall always feel happy when I contemplate the letter which the great Vologaes sent you, and which you will be so kind as to give me. Hospitality is a duty which I take pleasure in performing, a duty doubly pleasant to me when you are its object, and I should have been unwilling to wound your feelings. But tell me yourself, my Varro, should I not have been forced to violate the laws of hospitality if you had not been reasonable, since what is at stake is a thing so important as the maintenance of peace?" And Varro, still exulting in the fortunate solution of his difficulties, magnanimously agreed: "Both in the West and the East there can be only one opinion on that point: it would have been a crime to spare your guest in such circumstances. I admire Your Majesty's mildness and wisdom in having found this way out."

The King did not try to hide his satisfaction. "Yes," he said cheerfully, "it's pleasant to think that we have hatched out a trick to combine the requirements of political expediency with those of hospitality." He used the expression "hatched out" and the colloquial phrase sounded strangely in his laborious Greek. But Varro laughed and felt strongly tempted to clap the Great King on the shoulder.

CHAPTER LXXVII

VARRO DISAPPEARS INTO THE EAST

ON the day after this interview a courier brought Varro the Senate's verdict on his complaint regarding the payment of the Inspection Tax. The man brought along with it the six thousand sesterces in a sealed bag. Varro read the verdict with great amusement, opened the bag and let the coins glide through his fingers. Then he asked the man if he would deliver a letter to the Governor Cejonius as he returned through Antioch, and he gave him the bag and the money in payment.

Thereupon Varro sat down and wrote his last letter to the West.

Don't you think, my Cejonius (he wrote), that we have behaved rather like silly schoolboys in spite of our fifty years? The game is finished. It was a foolish game, and we were both bound to lose. It is the others who have won.

I propose to disappear, and you, my Cejonius, will be rid for ever of the man who resurrected Jumping Jack. I would not be telling the truth if I said that I regretted having done so; indeed, even now that I am on the point of vanishing for good, I cannot help smiling when I think of you and that nickname.

Our game has been expensive. In the enclosure there is an exact computation of what it has cost me. You will see that

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it amounts to almost all that I possessed. I am leaving nothing behind me here except my daughter Marcia. After the wrongs I have done her she is no longer a very likable human being. But she never loved the East, and I beseech you, my Cejonius, to have pity upon her and take her back with you to Italy. It would be a comfort to me if you did that. After all, our game was really for the six thousand sesterces, and strictly speaking you have lost.

I have never hated you, my Lucius, and I fancy that in your heart you too have always had a sneaking liking for me. Please accept a last smile and the sincere good wishes of your Varro.

He enclosed the receipt for the six thousand sesterces with the estimate of gains and losses on the back. He entered as the final item in the latter column: "Varro vanished."

Then he prepared for his journey.

He paid a last visit to Marcia and once more poured out his thoughts before a native of Rome. He told his pale and rigid daughter that Artaban would always give her protection. But if she wished to return to Rome she could do so; the means for her return were provided for, and someone would come to fetch her. Then he gave her the casket containing the papers; these represented all that he had done with his life.

"It looks," he went on, "as if I had finally lost the game. The real reason for my failure is that that poor fool Terence acted once in his life on his own initiative, and as a consequence wrongly. But I bear him no grudge, and if you should chance to see him again before they take you to Antioch, then tell him that Varro sends his greetings and hopes that his death may be an easy one.

"If anyone tells you that the real cause of my ad-

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venture was my quarrel with Jumping Jack, say nothing. But I hope you know that that's nonsense. I am no idealist, but without the great idea of Nero I would not have done what I did. I was a servant of the idea, half unwillingly, half willingly. Someone had to come and create the empire of Nero anew. If I had not created my Nero, someone else would have created another Nero, and a self-seeking King-maker would probably have fashioned a much worse one.

"Although the results may seem to gainsay it," he said in conclusion, "I have really acted sensibly and wisely. The idea of the union of the West and the East has grown stronger, and I have helped to strengthen it. It is only logical that I should completely vanish into the East now. I have no complaint to make."

During this monologue Marcia's thoughts were in confusion. It was a logical end to her father's unbridled life that he should disappear in the wild boundless sea of the East. And her dull isolation was an equally logical conclusion to hers. This was the inevitable fate of a woman who had been intended first as a vestal, and later to be the wife of a praetor or a consul or a governor, but instead had had to pass her brief years among these Eastern animals and become the wife of an impotent swindler and slave. Her thoughts were quite clear up to that point. But after that they became a confused chaos filled with wild images of life and death, Nero, Terence and Fronto, and with these fragmentary pictures and thoughts were mingled the indecencies which Fronto uttered when he was making love. During Varro's last words she smiled her crazy smile and began to hum to herself quite softly, and she still went on humming after he had finished; it was the air of the potter's song, or so it seemed to Varro, but the words he had never heard before.

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These words uttered in his daughter's weird sing-song and her strange fixed smile were the last memories that Varro took with him into his exile.

A few days later the Great King donned his stiff and glittering robes, put on his golden beard, seated himself on the throne behind the curtain, had the crown lowered until it almost touched his head, and along with an accredited representative of the Roman Governor signed the treaty assuring friendship between his Empire and Rome.

Before he had reached the end of Varro's letter, Cejonius decided to fulfil its request. But that was easier to decide upon than to carry out. Marcia refused to go on board the ship to Rome without the urn containing Fronto's ashes. But that urn still stood in a place of honour in the King's Palace in Edessa. King Mallukh felt reluctant to deliver up the ashes of a man who had served him so faithfully. Sharbil had to speak repeatedly and urgently to him and point out how compromising it might be if they insisted on sticking to Fronto's ashes, and at last the King yielded. So that now Cejonius could set off with Marcia for Rome. Rufus Atilius politely offered to escort the curious pair to the ship; but Cejonius thanked him and declined.

Hardly had Cejonius reached Rome when the Emperor sent for him. There was nobody else present at this interview, but everyone knew that the young Emperor liked to play at cat and mouse with his defenceless officials. That hour with Domitian could not have been a very pleasant one for a Governor so unfortunate in his term of office. Certain eye-witnesses who saw him leaving the Emperor's room after the audience, which lasted a long time, reported that he was reeling like a drunk man.

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Of the later lives of Lucius Cejonius, Consul and Governor of the Imperial province of Syria, and of Marcia Terentia, wife of Terentius Maximus, who at one time called himself Nero Claudius Caesar Augustus, nothing is known.

CHAPTER LXXVIII

THE JEALOUSY OF THE GODS

NERO-TERENCE had never known a happier period than that forty-fifth summer of his life. The Great King gave him a fine palace on the Euphrates Canal to himself; it was an hour's journey from the city of Ktesiphon. He also furnished him with a small court, including chamberlains, cup-bearers, grooms and serving-men of all sorts, and Nero set himself to combine the best points of the Graeco-Roman and the Parthian court ceremonial.

The fact that he had lost his empire certainly saddened him. Yet it was not his business to win that empire back, that was the business of Varro and Artaban. As he had lost it while Artaban was still having a hard struggle with his rival Pakor, it must be comparatively easy to win it back now that Artaban was victorious.

He certainly missed his former counsellors now and then, but he soon grew reconciled to their loss. Knops had failed him on the night that he left Edessa, and Trebonius had begun to doubt him; he had seen that perfectly well. They could stay where they were. During his first few weeks in Parthia Varro had occasionally visited him; but recently he had kept away. Nero sometimes wondered about this, but he made no enquiry. In Edessa he had needed the services of a statesman like Varro, but here in Ktesiphon he could turn to someone far greater, the Great King himself. Once every month the ruler of

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the Eastern world and the ruler of the Western world paid each other a visit of state.

Everything considered, Nero was perfectly content that the Chamberlain Vardan should visit him now instead of his former counsellors of state ; Vardan called upon him once a fortnight and at the request of the Great King reported on the situation. Nero was lazy in dealing with actual affairs ; and he would have been glad to be spared all consideration of politics.

During these deliciously tranquil months a quite unexpected success came his way. He had always been secretly vexed that his pronunciation of the Greek and the Aramaic th was faulty. For decades he had wrestled with that confounded consonant ; at times he had succeeded, but more often he had failed, and he had never managed quite to master it as he had mastered the other sounds of the two languages. If people still doubted the genuineness of his claim to be Nero, then the only ground for their doubt was that recalcitrant th. At last, during that summer, it yielded to him. All he had to do was to put his tongue against his teeth, and then he had it. He could afford now to rest on his laurels, he need no longer avoid that stubborn particle as he had done hitherto ; he could employ with confidence the Greek words for the sea and death, the words *thalatta* and *thanatos*. *Thalatta, thalatta*, he would say to himself many times, enjoying the sound of the word. Xenophon's ten thousand, when after their perilous wanderings through Asia they once more beheld the sea, could not have shouted with more delight : *Thalatta, thalatta*.

The lovely summer was drawing towards its close. Then one day the Chamberlain Vardan dropped in his report a piece of information calculated to disturb somewhat the Emperor's tranquility. The Romans, he said, were threatening the Great King with war if he did

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not cease from imposing upon them an Emperor they did not want. It had given Vardan considerable trouble to find this formula ; it was deliberately designed to make Nero enquire into his position, also to inform him as gently as possible that he should disappear from Ktesiphon. For Artaban did not want to deliver him up if he could help it, and he calculated that if Terence disappeared he could put off the Romans for some time, at least until they began to search for him in earnest. Human relations were not to be depended upon. They might change in quite a short time, and it might be wise in such a case to have Nero as a hostage. Yet the Great King wanted to keep to the terms of his treaty. On no account, he had impressed upon his chamberlain, must Nero be incited in plain words to fly. Vardan must employ only the most vague and blameless terms, and the idea of flight must come from Nero himself.

Vardan was the right man for this job. He took care to choose the most circuitous, respectful and considerate words he could find, but at the same time to indicate unmistakably the threatening nature of the situation. Nero realised that the Great King was having difficulties with Rome, and that it might be wiser to fly. But he could not bring himself to take these difficulties seriously. Artaban must rack his brains and find some way out. He, Nero, was strong in his divine majesty, and nothing else mattered to him. If the Great King was actually suggesting that he should fly, it was a piece of sheer insolence. He had no intention of obliging Artaban by doing so.

He went to sleep that night with an easy mind. But he was tormented by bad dreams. A figure from the underworld appeared to him ; a stout resolute figure striding towards him across the shadowy fields of the dead ; and Nero recognised Caja. She spoke to him as she had spoken in life. "Don't be a fool," she shouted at him in her bullying voice. "If I take my eye off you a minute

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you make some silly mistake. But now you've gone far enough. Get up, you fathead, and clear out of this. It's high time." And she shouted: "Clear out," as she had shouted in Rome and later in Edessa. As she spoke she grew more and more shadowy; it was strange, it was touchingly comic, to see such a stout woman becoming so shadowy; for she was a fat robust shadow, a well-fed ghost, and yet that coarse vulgar voice came from it saying: "Clear out." And as she finished her words were taken up by stringed instruments and tambours, which gave them a menacing and urgent effect, and presently they fell into rhyme:

And that means the end of your Thing,
For you'll swing
In a halter.

This dream did not alarm Nero, but merely amused him. So Caja had not become a bat after all, but had remained her good old self, and being sent to the underworld had not done her any harm. He was glad to know it, and he did not feel annoyed with her for still thinking him a nobody as she had done in life. It seemed that people didn't grow any wiser even in the underworld. As for her warning, he could afford to laugh at that. There was still so much to do that the gods wished him to do; numberless speeches he had not yet made, parts he had not yet played, buildings he had not yet built. The gods would never desert a man who had been chosen for such great things. His Caja's "Clear out" was simply comic.

He was less pleased with the potter's song which she had brought with her. Recently that insect had left him in peace, and he was annoyed that it had returned again. He went over the song with a critical ear:

And that means the end of your Thing.

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What nonsense. Years before, when he was living in Rome, she had insisted that he would never learn the proper way to pronounce *th*, it was too late ; if you hadn't learned it as a child you would never learn it. And now ? Had he learned it or had he not ? And filled with grim triumph, he said loudly and faultlessly into the darkness : "*Thanatos, thanatos.*"

The Chamberlain Vardan did not wait so long before paying his next visit ; in fact he called next morning. He mentioned again the threat of war with Rome if his King insisted on recognising Nero. Vardan still spoke courteously and respectfully, but more urgently than the day before. But Nero shut his ears ; he refused to hear.

Several days later a messenger arrived from Artaban commanding him to appear at the palace, where the Great King would make certain disclosures in the presence of the whole court.

This invitation disturbed Nero much more than the hints of Vardan and the warnings of Caja. All at once he saw clearly the game that was being played with him. This so-called war with Rome was merely a frame-up. In reality the Great King was eager to get rid of him because he was afraid that his, Nero's, divine majesty might outshine his own tin-pot Parthian one. Perhaps he would ask him to move farther from the capital, to Susa or somewhere ; perhaps he would reduce the number of his attendants or even banish him to one of his remote eastern castles, where he would find himself among coloured savages instead of civilised human beings. When a ruler became jealous of another's divine majesty he would stop at nothing.

Nero considered what he could do to dissuade the Great King from such unkingly behaviour. He found the very thing. The audience was to take place in the presence of the whole court. He would make a speech

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before all these dignitaries which would force Artaban to give up his contemptible project ; he would point out to the Parthian King in moderate and yet irresistible terms the duties of hospitality.

He set about his speech right away. To recall an ungracious king to the obligations of humanity was a difficult yet noble task such as only a Nero could handle. He worked with furious ardour. He wrote, declaimed, polished his sentences and memorised them. His speech on the duties of hospitality was masterly. He decided that if he himself were about to banish someone, and the man were to make such a speech, he would clasp him to his bosom, ask his pardon and call him brother. He rehearsed the speech in his lonely park and his empty reception-rooms. Every time he rehearsed it, it became more sonorous, moving and impressive. He felt almost thankful to Artaban for having given him the opportunity to make such a speech.

And then he found himself in the throne-room in Ktesiphon, solemn and uplifted, yet somewhat more nervous than usual. On the frieze running round the hall stood the old Persian kings ; Mithras stared down from the cupola ; and they would presently be listening to his great speech.

The curtain was drawn back, the crown hovered above the head of the Great King. Artaban's own speech was not a long one. He said that doubts had arisen regarding the identity of the man who claimed his hospitality. Even before these doubts had arisen certain things had occurred which were calculated to awaken them. The gods had allowed the man who called himself Nero to be defeated. Also he had fled secretly from his capital city Edessa. These doubts had been put to rest by the evidence of Varro, a man who had once enjoyed the confidence and the friendship of the great Vologaes.

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But now Varro had vanished, presumably in grief at having been deceived in the person of Nero; and with Varro had gone all proof of the genuineness of Nero's claims. Also the Romans declared bluntly and categorically that they would never recognise this man Nero as their Emperor; more, they were resolved to declare war on Parthia itself if the Great King insisted on protecting Nero any longer. For all these reasons, the King went on, he felt there was no choice left for him but to escort the man who called himself Nero to the Parthian frontier. The rest he would have to leave in the hands of the gods. If this man were really Nero, then the gods would prove the truth of his claim in terms which everyone must accept.

When Nero heard Artaban's first few words he was delighted by their baldness and sobriety; they would provide an excellent foil for his own speech. But as Artaban went on he grew uncomfortable. The speech he had prepared was no reply to the Great King's arguments; it consisted mainly of observations on ethics and humanity. It was, of course, at bottom a question of humanity whether the Great King should deliver up the guest who had fled to his protection. But this Artaban fellow seemed to be quite unaware of that. He simply drivelled about politics, that silly business of politics which he, Nero, had always left to his counsellors, that vulgar routine about which no Emperor would think of troubling his head.

But then his heart stopped, for it suddenly dawned on him that the question of delivering him up was perhaps after all merely a political question, and that Artaban might be living in a world of reality and he himself in a world of dreams. He immediately repudiated the thought. No, no. That could not be. The two of them could not be at such cross purposes. After all Artaban was a genuine king, the ruler of the East; he too possessed the divine majesty and must understand him.

But if he simply did not understand him? No, one must not let oneself be put out by such speculations. He would spoil his speech if he went into these subtleties. He simply wouldn't listen any longer to what Artaban was saying, to his "therefores" and "consequentlys" and "becausees". The man was merely chopping logic; but he would appeal to their hearts.

He did his best not to listen. But his ears listened in spite of himself, and Artaban's words penetrated to his mind. He wondered whether he should introduce a few sober prosaic arguments into his speech after all. Dio of Prusa, Quintilian and the rest of them had employed sober theses, to which they gave a rhetorical turn. He was annoyed with himself for not having thought of doing that. He surreptitiously glanced at the faces of the dignitaries standing round the King. They were devoutly listening to their ruler, and seemed to be deeply impressed. He must change the expression on these faces. Would he manage it?

Then in a flash he recognised his position. These courtiers were his enemies, and the Great King was his arch-enemy, and the words he was speaking were arrows aimed at his life. And he, Nero, had innocently and defencelessly given himself into his enemy's hands, and now he was lost. He sat and listened intently; but his heart was beating wildly and his hands were damp with sweat.

But now the Great King had finished and he himself must speak. "I do not know," his speech had begun, "how I should address you, noble friend. Should I say: I humbly raise my voice to you from the dust, son of the gods? Or may I venture to say: Lend me your ear, my brother?" It was a good beginning, and he had practised with care the expression of smiling embarrassment which was to accompany these words. He felt he could depend upon their effect; he merely needed to concentrate, and now he must begin.

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"I do not know," he began. But what was this? Could it be his voice that had spoken? Could it be his throat from which that hoarse whisper had come, which seemed to die away in the great throne-room before it reached the nearest listener? He cleared his throat and began a second time, filled with panic. "I do not know," he said. But it was even worse than the first time; nothing came from his throat but a husky, toneless whisper. Artaban was sitting quietly on his throne, politely waiting, listening. The courtiers stared at one another and became uneasy. He began a third time: "I do not know——" but no word came, only a toneless whisper.

The world seemed to be sinking round him. That incomparable speech was still in his heart and his mind. He knew that if he could only utter it the dark hostile faces round him would grow friendly, the heart of that stiff politic king, the hearts of all these Parthians, would open to him, and they would all fly to arms for him. During all his life his readiness of speech had failed him only twice, and the gods seemed to have chosen this day, this crucial moment, to afflict him with hoarseness and ruin him. In one moment he had ceased to be the Roman Emperor and become the most wretched and ridiculous of mortals.

He stood there in the robes of majesty. But beneath these robes there was nothing now but the poor potter Terence hounded by the Roman authorities and trembling for his life. And from the face of the man on the throne, from the faces of the priests and the dignitaries, he could read the words which the insect ticked in his head:

A Potter belongs to the mass,
Not to the ruling class,
He should stick to his clay and his ass.

CHAPTER LXXIX

THE THREE-HEADED MONSTER

ARTABAN gave Nero a splendid escort to the frontier ; it looked more like the train of a great prince than a troop of soldiers guarding a prisoner. At a little hill on the frontier Nero was handed over to the Roman authorities, and from it, the penultimate summit of his life, Terence gazed down at the Euphrates while the Roman officials wrote out an acknowledgment for him ; he gazed down at the Euphrates, which had once been his river, and at a town which less than a year before had wildly acclaimed him.

The Governor Rufus Atilius was not a cruel man, but he considered it only expedient that Terence should be strikingly humiliated, so that nobody would ever believe again that the man was the Emperor Nero.. So before the eyes of everybody his robes of majesty were torn from his back, fetters were put round his arms and legs and, clothed in dirty rags, he was slowly led through the streets of the town, where the people jeered at him, flung mud at him, and spat on him. Finally he was thrown into a dungeon in the citadel.

Terence was well-nourished, and his smooth rosy skin still gleamed healthily where it could be seen for dirt. His broad face was tolerably well-shaven, and the blows and missiles had not disarranged his carefully curled and

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frizzed hair. What had happened bewildered and astonished him, but it did not terrify him. The hole into which he had been flung was dark, damp and populated with rats. Nevertheless he slept soundly after his tiring day, and the first night of his imprisonment was certainly more tolerable than the night after Nero's death had been, or the night in the temple of Tarate, or the night which he had passed in the house of John of Patmos.

Next morning a second prisoner joined him ; he too was in rags ; he was very thin and his body was covered with scars and weals ; it was Knops. After much shilly-shallying, Mallukh had handed him over at last ; but his road to the Roman frontier had not been so pleasant as Terence's. Out of mere spite his escort had let the crowd get at him, and he reached the Romans in somewhat damaged condition. They had kept him short of food, he was half-starving, and his wounds pained him ; nevertheless he was not particularly dejected. He had heard from reliable sources in Edessa that his Jalta had escaped from the city unhurt. But more than that he had not been able to discover. She must now have given birth to her child ; but he had received no news of it. The important thing was that Jalta had escaped from the mob. His little Claudius Knops must be some weeks old, and he felt certain that all was well with him. Gorion knew where the money had been put, and he would find some means of getting at it. So the child would not have to face the world naked and defenceless, but provided with a good armour of gold. And little Claudius would take after him, would rise high in the world (higher than the cross which would be his own end) ; and he would beget new Knopses, fellows like himself, sly, clever, prepared to climb on the backs of his fellows and with abundant ability to do so. Knops was not a particularly courageous man, and he quivered with dread at the fate that awaited him. But

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the consciousness that what he had done and had yet to suffer would help his little son and therefore serve a noble end supported him, kept his mind keen and made him as ready as ever in quick and biting repartee.

In the dark cell he recognised his former master and emperor before Terence recognised him. He dragged himself across to Terence in his chains, stared at him and felt his arms, and then said: "Well, Red Beard, there's lots of things in store for you yet. You don't seem to have lost much flesh. But I'm afraid you won't be able to stick much longer to your fine figure. Oh, there's lots of things in store for you, and before you're finished your fat will cost you something. Whether you're bound or nailed to the cross, a fat man drags more heavily than a thin one and so he suffers more too. Though of course a fat man has generally better nerves." He banged Terence on the chest with his fettered hands. He was filled with deep resentment at this man who had had such enormous luck and had ruined it all for himself and his friends by running away.

Terence made no reply. He was suffering from hunger and still more from lack of a bath and a barber. But he wrapped himself warmly in his divine majesty. He had recovered from his first fall, he had emerged from his wanderings in the wilderness, and he would survive this last disaster too. The clear and pitiless words in which Knops described his approaching end took on an exalted colouring in his mind. He did not see himself as a common criminal condemned to the cross, but as a tragic figure, a hero fighting with fate; and Knops's words left him cold.

Next day the dungeon received a third guest. But General Trebonius arrived in a very different state from Knops; he was as stout, clean, and well-nourished as ever, there were no chains round his arms and legs, and he still

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kept his sardonic humour. He had held the citadel of Edessa until it could be held no longer. After its capture he should by all the rules of the game have fallen upon his sword. But he considered he had proved often enough that he wasn't a coward, and though an officer should be brave there was no reason why he should be a silly Stoic. So he decided to pay no attention to his evil promptings and go on living while he could. He had experienced astonishing changes of fortune ; he had taken part in battles which after seeming hopeless had turned at the last moment into victories. Every proper soldier believed in his luck ; without that belief no soldier could be got to fight at all.

But for the moment he found himself in prison and he lightened his hours there by poking rude fun at his companions. They squatted in their chains, quite despondent, while he, the darling of the army, was a favourite even in prison and was treated accordingly. And rightly. The other two, slaves both of them, were mere scum and richly deserved their crucifixion. But he was a free man and a popular officer in the Roman army, and the men in the army simply wouldn't stand for it if they tried any of their tricks on him.

The dark celloechoed with his loud voice ; his bulk seemed to fill it ; his mere presence drove away all thoughts of the underworld. He hunted the rats and carried on long and spicy dialogues with the guards through the walls. Then in his hoarse voice he would sing the potter's song out of tune, meanwhile beating time on Nero's shoulder or poking him playfully in the ribs. Like everybody else he had been taken in by the swindler, and like everybody else he now set about revenging himself on the wretch for his own foolishness.

He had a grudge to settle with Knops too, whom he had been forced so long to treat as an equal. But curiously enough Knops now began to recover his self-assurance,

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inspired by the presence of his old bosom friend. Although Trebonius was much better treated and chaffed and tormented Knops in all sorts of ways, Knops felt more superior to him than he had ever done before. He wasn't a stupid dunce like Trebonius; he could see things as they were. They would both of them die, he and Trebonius. But when Trebonius was bound to the cross that would be the last of him, while he, Knops, would survive in his little son; and consequently he felt immensely superior to Trebonius.

It would have been wiser, of course, to keep his thoughts to himself. But Trebonius presently became so insupportable that Knops simply had to take him down a peg. And so one day after Trebonius had been tormenting him beyond endurance Knops could no longer hold his tongue. "Don't you fancy things, Trebonius," he jeered. "Your noble carcass will be flung into the carrion pit along with mine, and the same dogs will gnaw the flesh from our bones. And then we'll see who was right, you for advising me to wait for a Senator's daughter in Rome, or I who have a fine son now by my Jalta. There will be nothing left of you at all, my dear General Trebonius. But there will be something left of me, a well-set-up Claudius Knops with the good healthy body of his mother, the clever head of his father, and a pile of money as well."

Trebonius sat on his pallet and listened; then he thought for a little and grinned to himself. He remembered that Knops had been arrested while Jalta was still with child. Trebonius knew the customs of the East, and he knew that every care would be taken to prevent a prisoner from communicating with the outer world. So after a while he slyly asked Knops if he had received news of Jalta and the brat. Knops was silent and Trebonius knew that he had heard nothing. So he began to make

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fun of him mercilessly : "Oh yes, everybody knows our Knops has a head on his shoulders. Have the gods told you in a dream that your Jalta has a son ? Can you say by looking at an egg whether a cock or a hen will come out of it ? Has nobody told you, you poor fool, that it's a girl and not a boy that you've got, a wretched little rat, the very image of yourself ?"

Knops told himself that the General was simply lying, yet he was deeply dejected by what he heard. Whenever the thought occurred to him that Jalta might have borne him a girl, he had immediately dismissed it. He was sorry now that he had given himself away, that he had spoken. Best to hold one's tongue, best not to let the scoundrel see how deeply he was hurt. But he could not keep silent, and he asked in an imploring voice : "Do you really know anything, Trebonius ? Please, tell me, Trebonius." Trebonius was highly amused. He told the guards of Knops's hopes and fears, and they tormented Knops night and day with crude jokes about his heir.

Terence paid very little attention to the presence of his companions. When they left him in peace he squatted in his corner, absorbed in his own thoughts. One day to their great surprise he said in an extremely polite voice : "I should be much obliged if you would make less noise." He suffered from hunger and still more from dirt ; but these belonged to the part which fate had chosen for him. Yet his desire for Caja, which increased day by day, certainly did not belong to it. Oh, how he longed now that she might come to him, how grateful he would have been to hear her abusive warnings. He cried to her from his heart, yearned for her that she might give him something to eat or prepare a bath for him.

The prisoners remained in their cell for several days without anything happening. Then a torch-

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bearer appeared and a man entered the cell who was to fill their thoughts for the rest of their short lives and even pursue them into their dreams: the Roman legionary Quadratus. For Atilius had entrusted this Quadratus with their execution; he wished the death of the false Nero to serve as a stern example to others. Quadratus was celebrated for his callousness and his knowledge of the people's tastes; he was popular both with the army and the mob; also he had every prospect of stepping into Trebonius's shoes.

Quadratus was not very tall, but he was broad and extremely muscular. His body was hairy, but his skull was bald except for a sparse ring of black hair; on his short neck his head with its nose like a duck's-bill looked somewhat grotesque. "Greeting, good and great Emperor Nero," was Quadratus's first salute to Terence. He said it in a quite prosaic and expressionless voice, but he gave Terence such a thump on the back that he shrank away with a cry of pain. Quadratus greeted the other two in the same way. His callous joviality made Knops's malice look childish, and even Trebonius lost his good spirits at the appearance of his rival.

Quadratus wished first, he said, to get an idea of the physical state of his "pensioners", and so he gave them exercises. Knops eagerly and smartly went through all the jerks prescribed by Quadratus. But Nero still had some sense of his divine majesty and Trebonius some sense of his position, and they put up a tough passive resistance. That quite pleased the phlegmatic Quadratus. He had the time and the means to break their resistance. He broke it. First that of Terence, and then that of Trebonius. In a very short time Nero's complexion lost its lustre, his beard became a dirty grey, and the name of "Red Beard" was obviously no longer a suitable one for him. Trebonius too lost his stately port, and the brown

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hairs on the backs of his hands became a whitish grey. Presently the three men weighed less than two of them had weighed before.

After Quadratus had had his private joke with them long enough, he set about providing a spectacle for the crowd such as the Governor expected of him. So one day the three men were led out into the courtyard, where they saw some workmen with boards, planes and saws. "Come, General," said Quadratus, turning to Trebonius, "I have kept you at your exercises long enough." Then he turned to Knops. "And you, my dear Secretary of State," he said, "will soon have a chance to make the public gape as you have so often done before. And you, Your Majesty"—and his voice remained as dry and expressionless as ever—"will be especially grateful to me, I am sure. For you will be given a unique opportunity to show your art to the people." And the workmen sawed and planed away until they had made a wooden collar for the three men, fashioned in such a way that it crushed the backs of their heads tightly together, while their faces stared out in three directions. Then the three were set on a cart and firmly chained, the huge wooden collar was put round their necks, a composition of wood and plaster was fitted over their bodies, so that nothing could be seen but the three-faced head staring out of the wooden collar. The composition of wood and plaster was shaped like a seated dog, and over it a number of dogs' hides were nailed, until the whole formed a fantastic and yet realistic effigy of a huge three-headed dog.

It was John of Patmos's phrase—he had called Terence, Trebonius and Knops the three-headed monster—that had given Quadratus his idea.

When the three men were displayed in their plaster disguise everybody understood at once what was meant. The soldiers slapped their legs, the whole town roared

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with laughter, and Quadratus was highly praised for his brilliant idea.

The three-headed monster was drawn through the country in the cart. Quadratus did not take the shortest route, he chose many by-ways, and proceeded in a sort of zig-zag, east to west, north to south, through the whole province. Since the Armenian King Tiridates had passed through the land twenty years before, along with several other Eastern kings, to lay his homage before the Roman Emperor, Syria had never seen a more enthralling spectacle. Great crowds followed the cart, the whole affair was a marvellous joke to them, and some people refused to be contented with one look at the three-headed monster, but followed him to the next town, or even the next after that.

The arrival of the three-headed monster was celebrated everywhere by a general holiday. The cities offered their stadiums and their circuses, so that everybody might see the prodigy. And it was certainly worth seeing. The three-headed monster devised by Quadratus was very different from the monster of which John of Patmos had spoken ; it was both more comic and more horrible. For the three faces with which the dog looked out at the people were the faces of old men, filthy, shrunk, wretched faces covered with tangled beards, and with a look so tormented, evil and bestial that many did not dare to go near them, though they were chained and securely guarded. Children clung in terror to the hands of their mothers, and women had hysterics.

But anyone who did approach had good value for his money. For you could touch the faces with your hands, pull their beards, or even buffet them if you cared to. Quadratus had provided well for the people's entertainment. He had had holes knocked in the plaster and anybody who liked could command the three-headed

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monster to give a paw. It had also to bark when anybody asked it. If it refused the soldiers on guard would tickle it with their spears through the holes in the plaster. "Boo hoo!" the people would shout and then they would bawl: "Bark, Red Beard. Bark, General. Give us a paw, Water-man." They called Knops Water-man in memory of the inundation of Apamea.

Nero kept very quiet; his inflamed eyes were shut most of the time, and the crowd did not get much sport out of him. Trebonius was the one who played up best. He was always exchanging spicy jokes with his rival and warder Quadratus. The chief theme of his satire was the Captain's wooden voice and duck's-bill. He said jeeringly that a man with such a wooden voice would never rise high in the army and never please the women either; you could judge a man by his voice. Whenever a child came near he would tell it to mount on Quadratus's nose and have a ride. Trebonius grew quite violent when they made him drunk. He would shout obscenities at the women, and everybody roared with laughter.

Knops was always staring at the children. He stared at them so piercingly—especially the very little ones—and with such despairing greed that the mothers grew frightened and pulled the children back. He did not seem to be offended at the children when they teased him, tugged at his beard or tweaked his face with their tiny fingers. But once when a woman held her two-year-old baby close to his face so that it might stuff a cake into his mouth, he suddenly bit its finger.

The three had to sit in their plaster cast for many hours every day. They had to keep their heads erect, otherwise the wooden collar chafed their necks. The plaster cast forced their bodies into a strained posture; they had to sit with their heads and shoulders painfully thrown back all the time.

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To the spectators it looked as if there were only one head on the neck of the huge dog. But that head had three faces, thought with three brains, and was supported by three bodies. These good companions had taken to each other as soon as they met, and had been warm friends and enemies ever since. Now they were more closely united to each other than any other three men in the whole world ; they seemed to have grown together, their bodies were a torment to them, and they could not endure each other's proximity.

It was the same air that their six nostrils breathed ; their six eyes saw the same sights ; their six ears heard the same sounds. In their brains was the same thought. "How long is there still to go?" they thought, and : "When shall we reach Antioch?" And : "These cursed swine." But at the same moment each of them was thinking his own thoughts. Knops was thinking, "My little son", Terence was thinking, "My Caja", Trebonius was thinking, "My luck".

They barked and they put up their paws, they cursed the world and themselves, they whimpered in impotent fury, they hated each other and snapped at each other and yet felt bound to each other more closely than to anybody else in the world ; for they were united by nature, by their good and ill luck, their successes, their crimes, their downfall and the death that was awaiting them.

But they felt this only during the first few days. After that they sank into a lethargy, and they could be roused to take an interest in things only by pinches and blows. They ceased to hate or love each other. They merely waited for the night, when they would be unchained from their cart.

Their progress through Syria lasted for several weeks. Day after day Nero and his companions were jeered at, spat upon, and pelted with dirt. They no longer felt

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it. They no longer saw the hatred or the satisfied pleasure in the faces of the people who jeered at them ; they were scarcely conscious even of Quadratus. They did not hear the shouts and the howls of laughter, or even the barks which they themselves gave. The only thing that still occasionally pierced to their minds was the air of the potter's song, that simple and yet subtle melody with its little suggestive pauses, and once the unmusical Trebonius growled mechanically : "In a halter," when he should have barked.

CHAPTER LXXX

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IN Antioch the three men were well looked after, so that they might make a good figure at their execution. It took them two weeks to get their strength back.

Early in the morning of the execution day they were led to the Hall of Justice and scourged and mocked by the spectators, according to the ancient custom. Nero's high-heeled imperial buskins were torn from his feet, his tattered robes were sprinkled with the blood from his wounds, a board was hung round his neck with the inscription "Claudius Nero Caesar Augustus", a piece of glass was stuck in his eye in derision of the emerald, a chamber pot set on his head for a crown, and he was then placed on a high chair. The soldiers pushed a straw doll into Knops's arms, for everybody knew how he yearned for his son ; and then Knops was placed at Nero's feet. Trebonius was stationed at Nero's other foot after they had sewn several imitation lead medals to his naked breast. Then they shouted : "Greeting, good and great Emperor Nero," and generally made merry at Terence's expense.

The crucifixion place lay to the north of Antioch at some considerable distance ; it was a bare hill called the Hill of the Fox. The three men were led through the splendid main street with its fine porticos. It was lined with

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people ; they stood on all the roofs and projections to watch Nero and his companions carrying to the fatal hill the beams on which they would be crucified ; the three men were faint with their scourging, and their clothes were smeared with blood.

It was a fine early October day, not really hot, but the three men suffered tortures from fever and thirst. A good walker could easily have covered the way in an hour ; it took them three, carrying their crosses. Knops broke down before they had left the city, and Terence collapsed shortly after him. They were forced with kicks and blows to get up again. The crowd bawled and then started to sing the potter's song.

While Terence was going his last road Varro was in the far East. It was nine o'clock in the morning in Antioch, but where he was it was noon. He was resting by the side of a dusty road under the shadow of a tree. He had stopped to take his dinner, which consisted of a bowl of rice and a little tough mutton. He ate with zest. He liked his new life. He had seen many new sights and would see yet more. The road by which he sat was a busy one and he had lots of time. He finished his dinner in peace and sat on. The people who passed him spoke a dialect of a foreign language ; he could catch only a word here and there and he made out very little of what they said. Yet even that little gave him food for thought. His methodical mind worked on the strange words until it made sense of them. He reflected that the queer ring of a word might alter one's image of what it stood for ; and his thoughts were far away from the past at the hour when the final stroke was being drawn through his "experiment" in Antioch.

But if he had known or even imagined that his servant Nero was about to be fastened to the cross, he would merely have reflected with a certain satisfaction

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that fate had made the worse but more innocent man pay for the sins of the better but more guilty one, and thus in a higher sense had acted with perfect fairness.

At the same hour King Philip was thinking of Nero in his palace in Samosata with a mixture of emotions in which irony had no part. He was walking restlessly up and down his fine library, and his mind was in a turmoil. He should not have let himself be led away by Varro. Rebellion was not in his line. He did not know now whether what he had done had been good or bad ; but the business had ended in a very different way from what he had intended. In spite of all Artaban's efforts, the new Governor Rufus Atilius had curtailed still further the sovereignty of the kingdom of Commagene. Perhaps that was all to the good in the end, for action was vulgar, only contemplation was free from evil. King Philip longed for the time when the brutal power of Rome, shaped to rule, would take the crown away from him altogether and his mind would be free to follow its thoughts and dreams, to read and to plan new buildings.

King Mallukh, too, was thinking of Terence at that moment. He had been better rewarded for taking the side of Nero. The High Priest Sharbil had proved himself a stubborn and skilful negotiator with Rome, and the kingdom of Edessa, effectually supported by Artaban, had emerged stronger and more independent than ever in the new Mesopotamia. Mallukh listened to the fountain plashing and told himself that the legend of the potter whom the star gods permitted to be emperor for a while had found a fitting and satisfactory conclusion. Edessa had become greater, and the man Terence had disappeared without King Mallukh's having to reproach his conscience with a violation of the laws of hospitality.

Meanwhile Nero and his companions were proceeding on their painful way. At the gate of the city, where the

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road began to rise to the Hill of the Fox, women were standing, and one of them handed him a potion intended to dull his sufferings. Along with the potion the giver had in such cases to say aloud his or her name and credentials. The woman said: "I give you this potion in the name of Marcia, daughter of Terentius Varro."

Then at last they came to the hill. From foot to summit the road up the hill was lined on both sides with a dense crowd. Quadratus had considered for a long time whether he should bind the three men to the cross or nail them there. If they were nailed their torments would be more intense but shorter; for the fever set up by the wounds hastened death. But when a man was bound to the cross, sometimes he survived to the next day or even to the day after that. Quadratus decided to bind his pensioners to the cross. Accordingly the soldiers tore the prisoners' clothes from their backs, tied their outstretched arms to the cross-bars, and then nailed the cross-bars to the uprights. The crowd greedily craned their necks and gaped while this was being done, and loud applause broke out when Nero, his chancellor and his chief commander hung neatly in the air at last, as the potter's song had prophesied. The soldiers drew lots, in accordance with the old custom, for the clothes of the condemned men, and people crowded round the winners to beg for a trifling memento of Nero, some out of mere greed, some out of superstition, and some probably out of piety, for you could not tell, the crucified man might be the Emperor Nero after all.

There the three men hung on their crosses. From the Hill of the Fox one had a fine view. The three men could see lying at their feet the river Orontes and its islands, as well as the countless palaces, porticos, monuments, villas and gardens of the beautiful city of Antioch into which a little while ago they had hoped to march in triumph.

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Only Trebonius remembered that hope now ; even on the cross he still clung to it. While the other two made no response to the jeers flung at them by the soldiers and the crowd, he kept up a running stream of abuse with his rival Quadratus. He had such an intense desire to live that he could not believe he was to die. The fact that he was not nailed but only bound to the cross was a good sign ; for that gave him a longer reprieve. The sarcastic inscription, "General Trebonius", which they had fastened above his head, did not annoy him ; he would prove it true yet ; the lead medals sewn to his breast pained him less when he thought that he would win the mural crown a third time yet. No, they wouldn't settle his hash so easily. He stretched out his head from the cross and stared eagerly down the hill to see if a messenger were coming from the army at last to save their beloved leader.

The sun mounted the sky. The effect of the potion wore off, and soon the three men could feel in all their limbs that strained rigidity which had been so familiar to them when they were the three-headed monster. Their torments grew with uncanny speed. Nero was the first to shut his eyes and let his head fall on his shoulder ; then Knops followed his example, and finally Trebonius did the same. There they hung with pale dry lips and fallen jaws, their blood-stained limbs quite still. Flies crawled over them. Their bodies took on a bluish hue, their skin prickled, their muscles and nerves clenched convulsively, their thoughts danced. Their gums and tongues were dry and swollen. Sometimes they lost consciousness, but never for long.

The crowd betted among themselves which of the three would die first, and if any would last till sunset. The majority thought that Terence and Knops would not survive the day, but that the powerfully built Trebonius might. A few still went on trying to make the men speak.

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Sometimes they succeeded with Trebonius, but the other two remained irritatingly silent.

The sun rose and then sank, and the three men hung on their ropes, motionless, their heads on their shoulders, their jaws fallen. But as the sun touched the horizon their limbs began to twitch and new life poured into their stiff bodies. The expert Quadratus had expected this. To liven them up a little more he soaked a sponge in wine and water and reached it up to them on the end of a pole. The sponge was put to their lips and then passed over their faces.

Nero convulsively sucked at the sponge. His head seemed to be filled with fire. The sponge refreshed him and cleared his mind, and he saw that his last duty as an emperor was to walk through that fire with dignity, fully conscious of what he was doing.

When the soldiers saw how greedily Terence sucked at the sponge they snatched it away, held it towards him, then snatched it away again. It was an amusing game for them ; but for Nero it was like plunging from bliss into torment : ever renewed hope, ever repeated disappointment. He must not forget his duty. He must walk through the fire, must swallow the flaming sun. They were trying to prevent him, but he would do it in spite of that. The sun was already low in the sky, he had swallowed the greater part of it ; he was still Nero. If they would put the sponge to his lips again he would succeed, he would swallow the sun to the last inch.

But they did not give him the sponge again. "The sponge," he tried to say, and then : "I am the Emperor." He opened his lips. But as he did so the words changed on his tongue and he was quite content that they should change ; for they were his favourite words and they seemed incomparable to him. He thought he was proclaiming them in a loud voice, but all that the people below could

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catch was a faint whimper. A man would have had to put his ear to Terence's lips to make out what he was saying. And that was merely two words, which he was uttering with a sort of enchantment. They were the words "*Thanatos*" and "*Thalatta*", the Greek words for death and the sea, and as desire and fulfilment had now become one in Nero, it is probable that these two words had melted to a single thought in his mind. "*Thanatos*", he sighed, and "*Thalatta*", and so well had he learned his lesson that even in the hour of death he brought off the th without mishap.

But Trebonius was not so meek when the sponge came to him. To everybody's joy he began to curse at the top of his voice, and abused the spectators, the soldiers and his companions hanging beside him. The soldiers vowed he was a great lad and deserved his reputation in the army. It was as good as certain now that he would last longest and survive the night; the people who had betted against him could go home, they had lost their money.

Trebonius kept his most deadly insults for his rival Quadratus. "Comrades," he shouted to the soldiers, "if this fool Quadratus ordered you to scale the walls of a town in his rusty old voice, you simply couldn't do it for laughing, could you?" But Quadratus retorted in his usual dry and expressionless voice: "That's right, Trebonius, curse till you burst; it will give the dogs less trouble to get at you." But then Trebonius pulled himself together. With a last effort he gathered what spittle remained in his dry mouth, pursed his lips, and taking a good aim spat straight down on Quadratus's bald crown.

There was tumultuous applause at that. The soldiers laughed while Quadratus wiped his skull, and Quadratus himself was glad that Trebonius had enlivened the

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proceedings ; he could understand a joke even when it was made at his own expense. So Trebonius could be satisfied with the effect he had produced.

But amid the universal satisfaction his huge head suddenly fell on his breast and he did not stir again.

Quadratus was disappointed. Could the man really have pegged out ? He jabbed Trebonius on the side with a spear, but he made no response. Then he had the man's legs broken ; but it was no use, Trebonius was really gone. The soldier who had strutted about the world so proudly proved to be weaker than the dried-up Knops and the puffy Nero, and he had badly let down the sportsmen who had put their money on him. Quadratus regretted the speedy demise of his rival for many reasons. For one thing he felt a certain respect for the man, also he had promised himself considerably more amusement from his death struggles.

At last night came. There was a thin moon, and it was on the point of setting. Quadratus ordered the torches to be lit. He was worried and disappointed over Trebonius. Perhaps he might manage to goad Knops to one of his notorious witticisms. He reached up the sponge to him again.

But Knops failed him too ; he remained dumb. He was still capable of thought, but it was questionable whether his thoughts would have amused Quadratus and the other spectators, even if he had uttered them. For he was thinking : "It's night now, and I'm not gone yet. It's horrible how much strength and toughness there is in one feeble body. But it's a good thing too. My little Claudius Knops will be a strong man. Where are you now, my son, or are you there at all ? Oh, if I could only see you I would die in peace." And suddenly a great gust of hatred and anger rose in him at Trebonius, who had robbed him of his sure faith in his son and heir. With unspeakable

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labour he made to turn his fly-covered face to the side where Trebonius was hanging, so as to shout his fury into the man's face. But his neck muscles were too feeble, his tongue and lips would not obey him, and the result of his immense effort was a mere twitching of his grey stubbled face.

Was this the end? Was his impotent rage at Trebonius to be his last gesture? Suddenly a shout came to him through the darkness, not very loud, but quite clear: "Be comforted, Knops. Die in peace. You have a son to remember you, a fine healthy son."

No change appeared on Knops's face, and it was impossible to say whether the words had really reached him; for when Quadratus had his legs broken it turned out that he too was dead. Yet if any voice in the world could have pierced to his ears and his heart at that last moment, it was the voice which had shouted those words, the clear and practised voice of John of Patmos.

Yes, John of Patmos had left Edessa and come to Antioch to witness the death of Terence and his companions; and he was squatting on the ground and staring up at the three men. He had sat there all day and had seen and heard everything. Many people recognised him and spoke to him, but he made no reply. He remained silent the whole day; and the only words he spoke were the few lying and comforting words he shouted to Knops.

As night had fallen and the wager as to who would die last was now settled, the majority of the spectators left. The torches flared, the moon was gone. Quadratus and his men lay on the ground drinking and dicing and waiting dully for Terence to die.

As he watched Terence wrestling with death on the cross, John felt a deep satisfaction and an overwhelming pity. The air was chill now, and John shivered, but he wrapped himself more closely in his cloak and stayed on.

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He must witness to the very end the death of that wretched man Terence. He felt that in doing this he was coming nearer than anyone before him to the solution of the torturing question: From whence were evil and suffering, and for what reason were they sent into the world. If he was to describe faithfully the revelation that had been vouchsafed him, the message of comfort that he dimly divined, then he must watch over the death of this man Terence.

For the death of this poor pretender was also a part of the great passion.

Was that thought blasphemy? No, it was a new revelation. He saw himself as a man waiting for the age of the fifth seal, a man condemned and yet acquitted, a man chosen to live in a world of death, and the fifth seal, which had remained closed to him till now, opened at his touch. Even that poor ape of Nero, the message told him, served reason in his own way; even his rise, glory and passion brought nearer the kingdom of the good.

Just as every man must have tasted evil to be truly good, so mankind must pass through the kingdom of evil to achieve the kingdom of righteousness. Without Satan, without the Anti-Christ, Christ himself was unthinkable; without the thousand-year-long kingdom of sin and expiation the promised redemption could never be attained. And for that reason the kingdom of Nero and his ape was necessary and therefore reasonable.

In John's mind dawned the meaning of that dark and awful saying of the Jewish doctors: "Thou shalt serve God even with thy evil." He realised that evil itself existed merely to advance reason and goodness.

The people who supported the wretch Terence had wished to unite the two halves of the world for their common and ignoble ends; but all that remained of them and their miserable tool was the idea of union, not the

THE FALSE NERO

idea they had thought of, but the Messianic idea. Seen from above the individual folly of men served reason, which ruled time and would sometime fulfil it.

Without darkness the idea of light could not exist. If light was to come to consciousness of itself it must grasp its antithesis, must recognise the darkness.

And in John's mind the message which he was called to proclaim grew clearer, and he found the words for it: "In the beginning was the Word, the Holy Spirit, the Reason. All things were made by Him ; and without Him was not anything made that was made. In Him was life ; and the life was the light of men. And the light shineth in darkness ; and the darkness comprehended it not."

Terence lived through the whole night. Not till dawn died Terence Maximus, who for several years had been acknowledged by several millions of people as the Emperor Nero.

Permission was sometimes given for the bodies of condemned men to be taken down and buried, on the payment of a fee. Tradition claims that this fee was paid for the dead body of Terence, that he was taken down from the cross, washed and his body burned. The urn containing his ashes was sent to Rome.

What is certain is that a second urn appeared in Claudia Acte's mausoleum, and remained there in a place of honour to the end of her days ; it contained the ashes of an unknown man and bore no inscription.

THE END

References to the false Nero are to be found in Tacitus, Suetonius, Dio Cassius, Zonaras and Xiphilinos, also in the Apocalypse of John and the fourth Book of the Sibyl.

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